
Aber Falls Hotel Abergwyngregyn



Archaeological Evaluation

GAT Project No. G2005
Report No. 715/2
February 2008

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Prepared for Owen Davenport Planning Consultants

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Cover: Development area. Photo D. Longley

By

George Smith

ABER FALLS HOTEL G2005

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION

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ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION

SUMMARY

An archaeological evaluation was carried out in advance of proposed development on land adjacent to the Aber Falls Hotel, Abergwyngregyn. The evaluation was recommended following a previous desktop assessment (GAT 2008). The assessment identified potential for the presence and survival of some archaeological features from the Medieval and prehistoric periods. The evaluation was carried out by the excavation of two trial trenches, which provided a sample of the area. These did not produce any evidence for the presence of such archaeological features and it was therefore considered likely that the area had not been used for any previous activity of archaeological significance.

1 INTRODUCTION

An archaeological evaluation by trial trenching was agreed at Aber Falls Hotel, Abergwyngregyn at NGR SH 6559 7276 (Fig. 1) after a previous archaeological assessment by Gwynedd Archaeological Trust (GAT) for Owen Davenport Planning Consultants had identified the need for further investigation. The evaluation was required by the Snowdonia National Park Authority (SNP) as a condition of the application for planning consent in order to allow better assessment of the archaeological potential of the site.

The area affected by the development consisted of the former garden of the hotel, an area of approximately 0.1 hectare (1,000sq m). This area was agreed to have some archaeological potential because of its proximity to a scheduled ancient monument, a Medieval castle mound (SAM C007) as well as a Medieval hall (GAT PRN 5158) and surrounding enclosure as well as to the village of Aber which itself has Medieval origins.

Acknowledgements

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2 SPECIFICATION AND PROJECT DESIGN

The method of evaluation was agreed verbally after a meeting on site between Mr P. Lovesy, Mr J.G. Roberts (Snowdonia National Park Authority) and Mr G. Smith (GAT). This required two trenches to be excavated in areas where preservation of earlier surfaces seemed likely (Fig. 2a). The work was to be carried out by machine excavation, followed by hand cleaning and recording.

The two trenches were each to be 8m by 1.6m, representing a 2.5% sample of the development area.

3 METHODS AND TECHNIQUES

The work was carried out on 18th and 19th February 2008. The two trenches were excavated using a tracked mini-excavator. The soil was excavated gradually in shallow spits until the top of the subsoil was reached. Part of one trench where no features were identified was excavated some way into the subsoil to confirm that it was natural. After completion of the excavation and recording the trenches were backfilled on 20th February 2008.

The trenches were planned in relation to the whole site and a larger scale plan and one long section was drawn of each trench.

The archive of paper and photographic records is held at Gwynedd Archaeological Trust, Garth Road, Bangor as Project No. 2005.

4 TOPOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND

The site lies at the mouth of a small but deep valley and only 20m from the edge of the River Aber. The general ground slopes gently from south to north and from east to west but the development area itself is fairly level, having been landscaped in the early 20th century for a tennis court.

The surface topsoil has been much altered by garden landscaping but the natural soil of the area is Brown Earth of the Aber Series developed over glacial drift (Ball 1963). The underlying rock is Ordovician siltstones and mudstones (British Geological Survey 1993).

5 HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

A desktop study was prepared for the assessment and is repeated here.

The proposed development site lies on the west side of the river channel at the northern edge of the village at the junction between the valley and the coastal plain. The Gwynedd Historic Environment record shows 17 features within about 500m of the proposed development (Fig. 1) but the wider area has numerous recorded features. The upland to the south and the valley floor were well used in the prehistoric period as shown by the presence of several cairns of Bronze Age type on the hill-tops and ridges as well as remains of settlements and fields. Some of the latter in the uplands may be of the Bronze Age, but most are likely to be of the Iron Age, continuing into the Roman period. These later settlements were probably associated with a hillfort, Maes-y-Gaer to the south-east, overlooking the entrance to the valley and the first indication of a territorial focus at Aber.

The Gwynedd Historic Environment Record shows that, in contrast to the uplands, the coastal plain has relatively few recorded prehistoric remains. The better-drained uplands were probably traversed by trackways and cleared and settled at an earlier period than the lowlands. Nevertheless there are some finds from the plain in this area including a Neolithic stone axe (PRN 7478), an Early Bronze Age stone axe-hammer (PRN 4071) and two mounds of burnt stone (PRNs 927 and 4092), thought to represent cooking places of the 2nd millennium BC, the nearest 550m to the east.

There is some evidence that the plain was settled and farmed in the Iron Age and Roman period indicating that most remains of such settlement have been removed by subsequent centuries of clearance and ploughing. For instance, some earthworks of roundhouses survive at Wern Newydd (PRN 257), 2km to the north-east and remains of a probable settlement enclosure have been seen on aerial photographs of crop marks in fields near Tal-y-Bont 1.5km to the west (PRN 12728).

The settlements on the coastal plain would almost certainly have continued in use during the Roman period, when agricultural settlements in the area generally seem to have flourished. At this time a road was created along the landward edge of the coastal plain, connecting the Roman forts at Caerhun and Caernarfon. Its position has been identified by the discovery of a Roman milestone (PRN 368) at Madryn Farm 1km to the north-east of Aber and by traces seen on aerial photographs as crop marks in fields near Madryn Farm to the east, as well as to the west near to Tal-y-Bont (D. Hopewell pers. com.). The alignment shown by these cropmarks suggest that close to Aber the Roman road lay on a similar line to the later Turnpike road and so has been removed or overlain by it and probably crossed the river at a similar place (Hopewell 2007, Map 4).

Possibly the earliest settlement at Aber itself is indicated by the church of St Bodfan on a rise in ground 300m to the west of the proposed development (Fig. 1, 1628). The original church was demolished and rebuilt but it lies within a sub-circular enclosure (or *llan*). Such features usually indicate an Early Medieval foundation and the earliest ecclesiastical settlement would have developed around the church (Johnstone 1995).

It was control of the crossing point at the junction of the coastal road and another taking the upland route through the valleys that was the key to Aber's importance and the reason why a small castle on a mound or motte was built there, possibly during a campaign by the Norman Earl of Chester during an unsuccessful attempt to subjugate Gwynedd between 1081-1090. Later, when Gruffudd ap Cynan re-asserted the independence of Gwynedd and established administrative control he made Aber the *llys* or court of the commote of Arllechwedd Uchaf. The hall that was built there became one of the favourite residences of the princes of Gwynedd. The valley was a sheltered place and its position facing the priory at Penmon may also have made it attractive. The earliest antiquarian description was by Leland in the 1530's who stated 'The moode in the parish of Aber otherwise Llan Boduan, wher Tussog Lluelin uab Gerwerd Trundoon had a castle or palace on a hill by the church, whereof yet parte stondith'. Excavations in 1993 revealed the foundations of a hall close to the castle mound of Ty'n y Mwd, associated with pottery of the 13th-14th and 15th century, a ring-brooch of 13th-14th century style and a coin of 1335-43 (Johnstone 1994, 1995, 1997 and 2000; Longley 1997).

The hall of the llys lay close to the motte and within a curvilinear enclosure believed to be the bailey or castle yard. The village grew up around the west side of this bailey enclosure. In the late 13th century 24 families were recorded as living there (Lewis 1912, 175). After the death of Llywelyn the Manor of Aber passed through various hands and although still maintained for some time the hall eventually fell into decay. However, the village continued and in 1339 was granted the right to hold a weekly market and a fair three times a year (*ibid*). It seems to have flourished because of its position on the crossroads at the junction of the valley and coastal road and the route from the coastal road across the Lavan Sands for the ferry across to Anglesey, which was the chief route across the Straits until the opening of Telford's bridge in 1826. This route was also a droving route, which took the valley road over the hills and may have therefore been associated with the Aber fairs.

The coastal road originally crossed the Aber River by a bridge close to the Aber Falls Hotel but a new bridge was built in about 1839 a little to the north with a new length of road, which then bypassed the village on that side (UB BH/6895).

The manor eventually came into the hands of the Bulkeley Estate of Baron Hill (Anglesey) in 1689. The Tithe map of 1848 shows that the area now occupied by the Aber Falls Hotel was a part of a narrow strip of land alongside the river (Field 30a), a subdivision of a larger field (30) that extended further to the north and west, the name of which was recorded in the Tithe Apportionment as 'Bulkeley Arms Inn'. The inn itself was also named on the Tithe map. It lay within the former glebe land between the church and the Rectory. The inn was later to become the house called Tan-y-fynwent. The Chester and Holyhead railway opened soon after and a hotel (The Aber Hotel) was built at the north side of the area, close to Aber station, presumably to take advantage of the tourist trade to the Aber Valley. The Aber parts of the Baron Hill estate along with arable land to the north of the church, formerly Glebe or Church land, were acquired by the Penrhyn Estate in 1862. A Penrhyn Estate property list of holdings in various parishes in 1886 still records for Aber the 'Bulkeley Arms Hotel buildings and gardens. Part of Glan y Mor and former glebe.' (UB Penrhyn 274).

6 ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESULTS

The excavation produced 12 context records, 4 drawings on two sheets and 32 photographs in digital format.

The artefacts comprised some 20th century building materials (discarded) and a few pieces of Post-medieval pottery and glass.

Trench 1 in the south part of the area was shallow, with the subsoil surface at between 0.20m to 0.35m depth, maximum. Trench 2 in the north part of the area was much deeper, with the subsoil surface at 0.8m depth.

Trench 1: (Fig. 3)

The garden topsoil (Context 1) lay directly over orange-brown silty subsoil (Context 5) containing a scatter of *in situ* sub-rounded boulders, one of which (A) was over 1m long and wide. Its surface had been split apart to reduce its height, probably during

creation of the hotel tennis court. The subsoil appeared to be glacial boulder clay, and with no material derived from the nearby river. The division between the topsoil and the subsoil was quite sharp, indicating that any original natural soil profile had been truncated. The assessment had indicated that the southern part of the garden had been artificially terraced into the slope and the area where trench 1 was excavated seems to have been somewhat affected too.

Cleaning over the surface of the subsoil produced a few fragments of glazed kitchen and tableware, plant pot, glass bottle and window glass.

A pit (6) was observed at the south edge of the trench. It was filled with dark topsoil-like loam and a few large stones, and contained a fragment of plant pot or ceramic pipe of 20th century date. The pit was most likely a hole where a boulder had been removed during creation of the tennis court and then backfilled. A one inch diameter iron pipe crossed the trench, being a disused water pipe that was the original water supply to the hotel from the river (P. Lovesy, pers. com.).

The west end of the trench had fewer stones and being devoid of archaeological features was cut down by a further 0.6m by machine to confirm that layer 5 was subsoil. This was so and it continued unchanged at this depth.

The subsoil surface sloped gently from east to west, away from the river.

Trench 2: (Fig. 6)

Removal of the topsoil in this trench revealed a deep, dark brown soil layer containing scattered small boulders (Context 8). This overlay a similar coloured soil without large stones (Context 9). This layer merged gradually into an underlying deeper, lighter coloured silty soil (Context 10). This layer in turn merged into an underlying stony subsoil of light coloured silt with scattered pebbles and sub-angular and sub-rounded boulders (Context 11). This appeared to be the weathered interface with the much stonier underlying glacial drift. Its surface sloped gently from east to west as in Trench 1 and was bouldery at the east but more gravelly at the west.

There were no features or structures, within the depth of the removed layers, or in the subsoil surface.

Two pieces of glazed pottery were recovered during removal of Context 9. There were no other finds.

7 ARTEFACTS

Trench 1

Context 2 (Cleaning over machined subsoil surface):

2 fragments of red earthenware with dark brown glaze - kitchen ware of 18th-19th century date.

1 fragment of plain white glazed tableware.

1 fragment of white glazed tableware with dark brown, light brown and blue banded decoration. Later 19th century.

2 fragments of unglazed plant pot, one with part of stamped maker's name '...ANKLY'.

1 fragment of thick-walled, dark brown, dimpled base, probably hand-blown, wine bottle. Probably early 19th century.

2 fragments of thin window glass. Probably horticultural.

Context 7 (Fill of pit 6)

1 fragment of thick brown glazed kitchenware or ceramic pipe (discarded).

Trench 2

Context 4 (Buried topsoil)

2 fragments of white glazed tableware, both with blue hand-painted decoration. 18th century.

8 CONCLUSIONS

The excavation showed that the original ground surface, prior to the construction of the hotel, sloped gently to the north, as expected. The present ground surface also slopes gently to the west away from the river and it was expected that this was a result of landscaping. However, the excavation showed that it was a natural slope. The original glacial outwash valley would probably have been a jumble of different materials and overlaid channels and its lowest point was further to the west than the present river channel. Also, there was probably an outwash delta here where the valley opened out onto the coastal plain and the river would have cut down through this. It is also possible that before the river was bridged, when it was still crossed by a ford, the river took spread out more widely and shallowly across the plain. Certainly the river channel was straightened in later times and a weir built at the later bridge crossing, when it was partly diverted to drive a mill at Hen Faes, and this straightening probably cause it to cut down into its bed. The river channel as it is today is narrow and steep-sided and would have been difficult to ford.

In Trench 1 the modern topsoil lay directly over the subsoil and there were no features or finds apart from those of the 19th and 20th century.

In Trench 2 there were several buried horizons. The uppermost (Context 8) was made-ground to level up the area for the tennis court. It consisted of re-deposited topsoil with some boulders and probably derived from removal of the topsoil to the south, where the ground had been terraced-in and perhaps also from the north, where a drive had been terraced into the slope.

Below the redeposited made-ground was Context 9, which was fairly stone-free dark, humic buried topsoil. This was the topsoil that existed prior to the construction of the hotel and tennis court. It was a well-mixed soil, with scattered pebbles and this could indicate that it had been a ploughsoil when this area was part of a larger field, prior to the construction of the new bridge, about 1839. On the other hand, it could have been mixed by trampling if the area was used for cattle during droving or fairs. The date of

the two pieces of pottery from this layer certainly shows that they derive from activity prior to the construction of the new bridge.

The absence of any features, structures, buried surfaces or deposits or of objects earlier than Post-medieval date in either trench makes it probable that this was not an area of settlement in the Medieval period.

The absence of burnt stones or charcoal also indicates that there was no prehistoric cooking activity in the areas excavated or close by.

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Tithe Apportionment Register for the Parish of Aber 1848. Handwritten copy held at GAT.

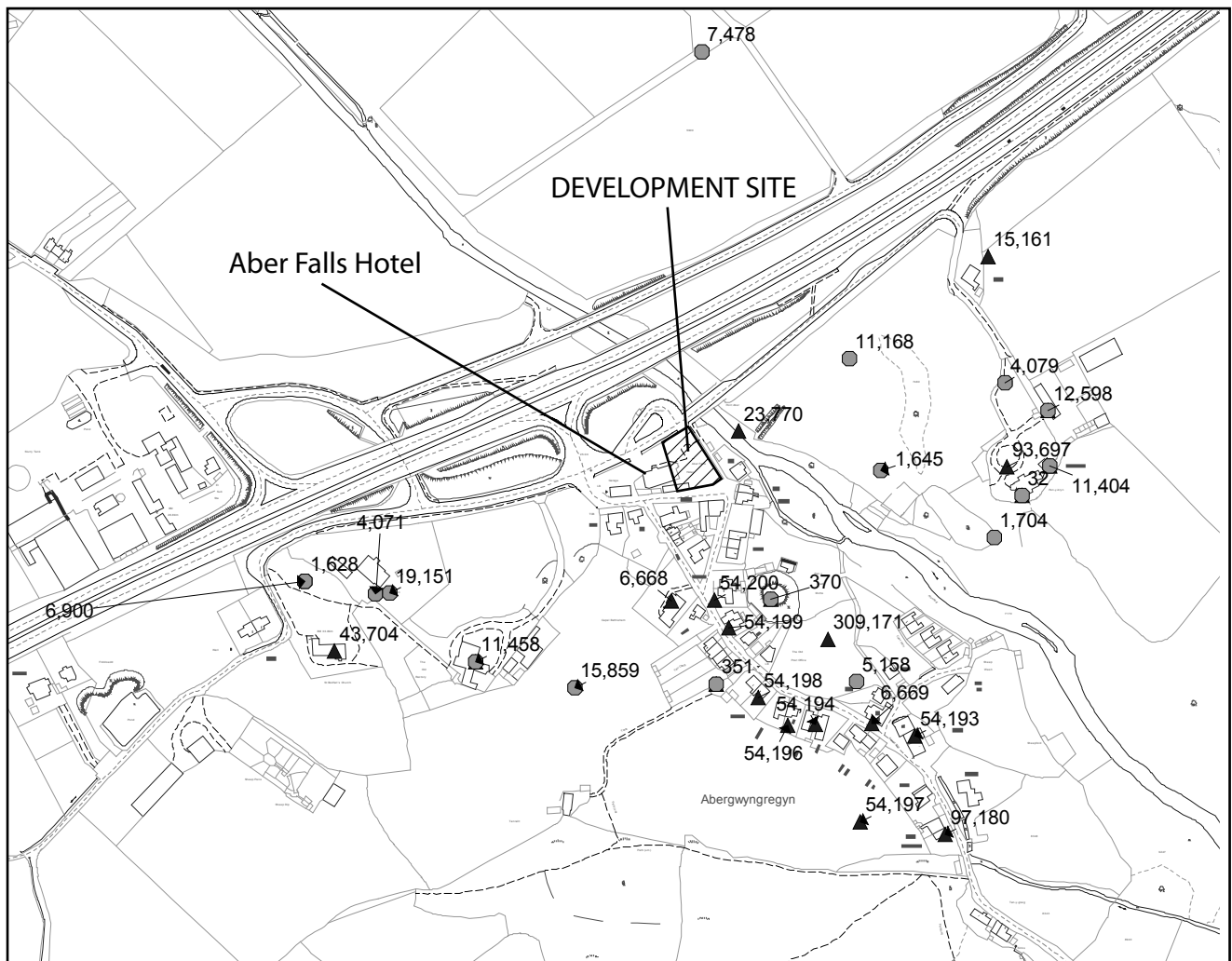
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Pictures

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Aber, Rowlandson, c. 1797. On line Archives, National Library of Wales Archives PD 9371.

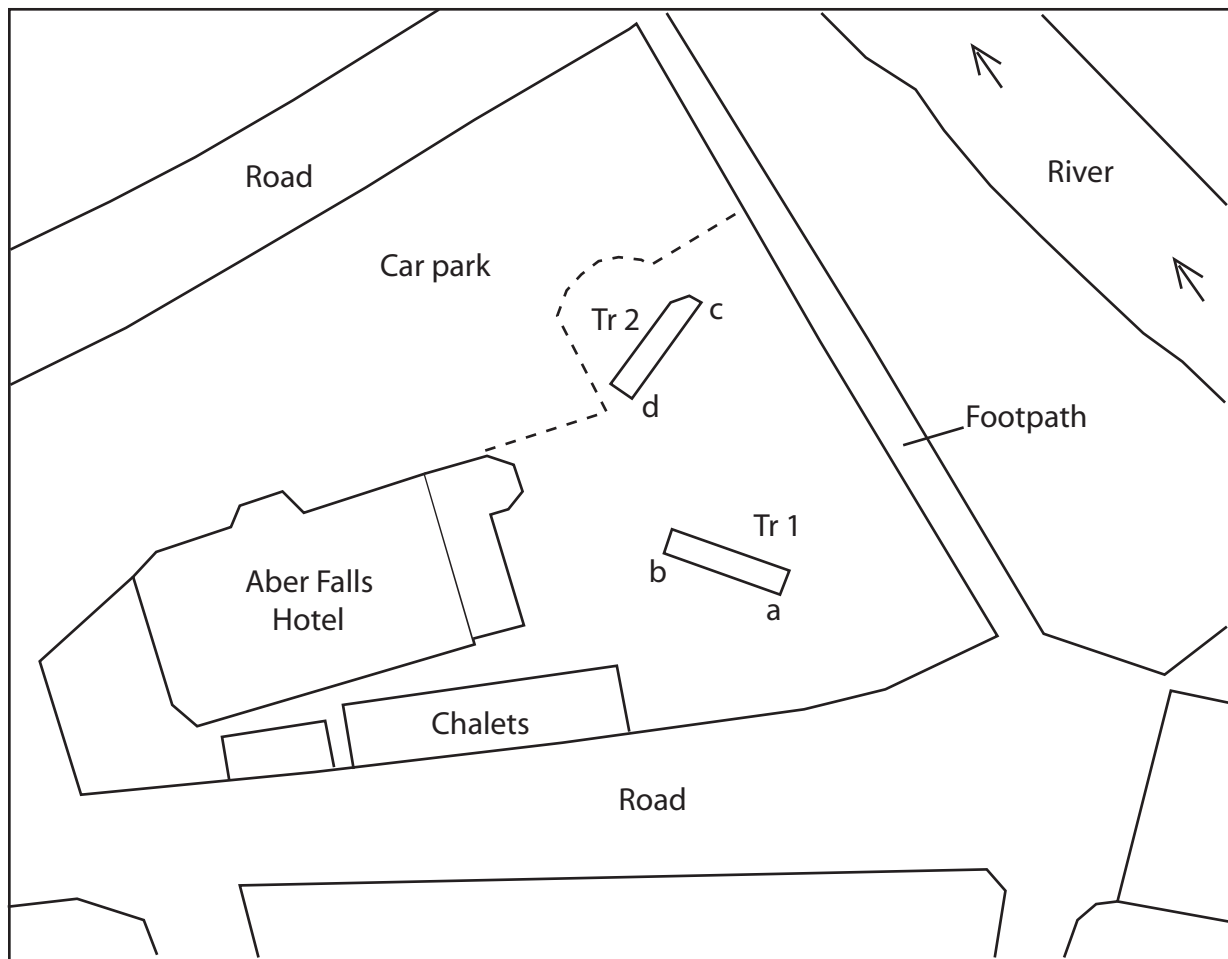


Aber Falls Hotel Archaeological Evaluation

Fig. 1 The location of the development site and of all recorded archaeological and historic features within 500m. Scale 1:5000

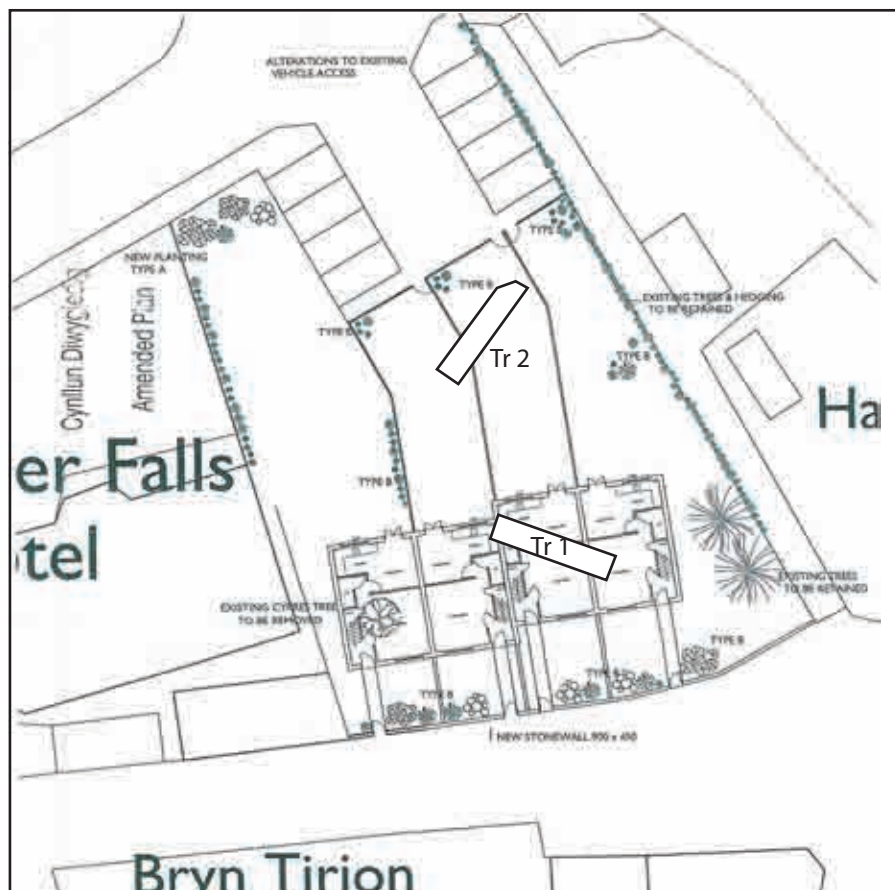
Based on OS 1:10,000 scale maps.

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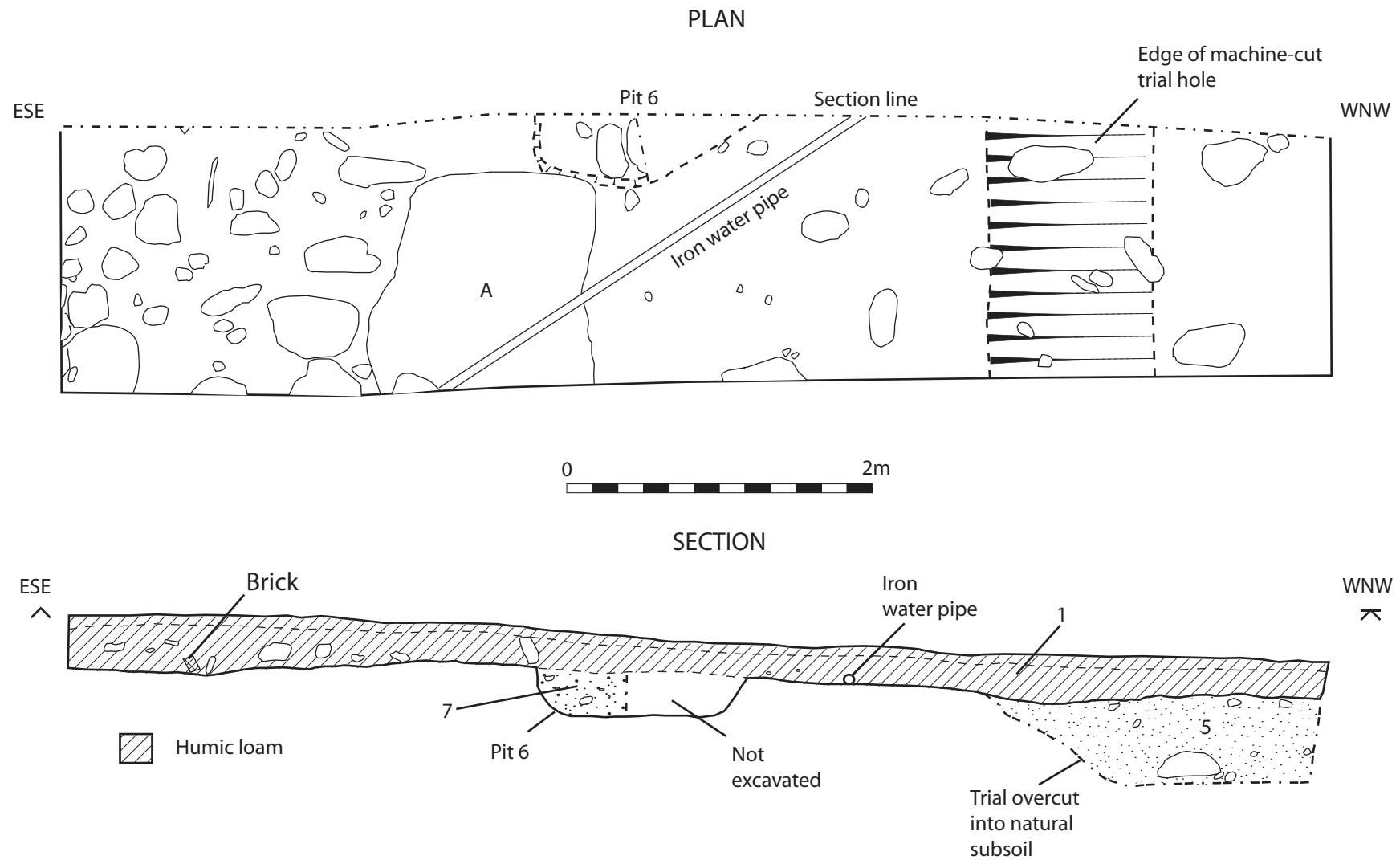
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Fig.2 Location of the evaluation trenches in relation to the existing structures. Scale 1:500 approx.



Aber Falls Hotel Archaeological Evaluation

Fig. 2b Location of the evaluation trenches in relation to the footprint of the proposed building construction. Scale 1:500 approx. (After Russell-Hughes Cyf, Drg 1530:07:3)



Aber Falls Hotel Archaeological Evaluation
Fig.3 Trench 1 Plan and Section. Scale 1:40

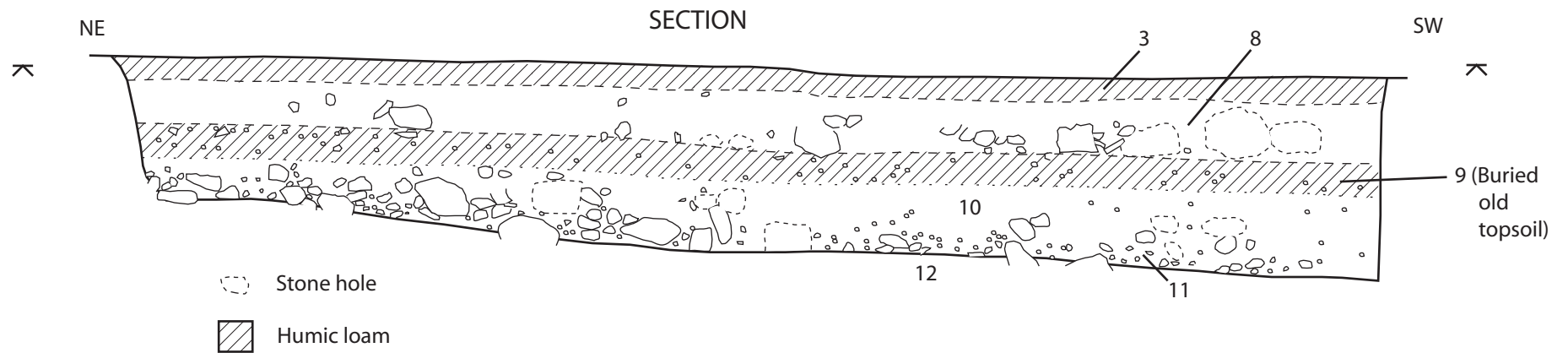
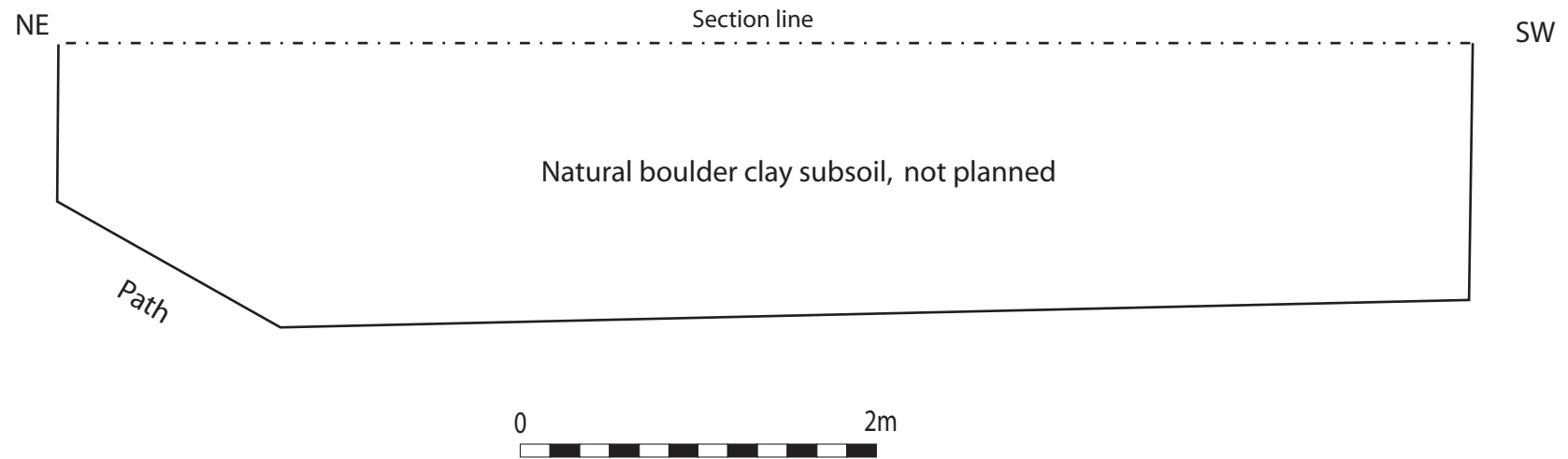


Aber Falls Hotel Archaeological Evaluation
 Fig. 4 Trench 1 after excavation showing the top of the drift subsoil.
 From the south-east. 1m scales



Aber Falls Hotel Archaeological Evaluation
 Fig.5 Trench 1 section, showing the trial cut into the subsoil (foreground).
 From the north-west. 1m scales

PLAN



Aber Falls Hotel Archaeological Evaluation
Fig.4 Trench 2 Plan and Section. Scale 1:40



Aber Falls Hotel Archaeological Evaluation
 Fig.7 Trench 2 after excavation showing the top of the drift subsoil.
 From the south-west. 1m scales



Aber Falls Hotel Archaeological Evaluation
 Fig.8 Trench 2 section showing the buried soil 9.
 From the west. 1m scales



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Craig Beuno, Ffordd y Garth, Bangor, Gwynedd LL57 2RT Ffon/Tel 01248 352535 Ffacs/Fax 01248 370925
e-mail: gat@heneb.co.uk web site: www.heneb.co.uk