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**BRYN GWYN STONES, BRYNSIENCYN, ANGLESEY
EVALUATION EXCAVATION 2008
PRELIMINARY REPORT**

**Project No. G1629
Report No. 790**



**Prepared for Cadw
March 2009**

By George Smith



**Ymddiriedolaeth Archaeolegol Gwynedd
Gwynedd Archaeological Trust**

☎ 01248 352535 ✉ 01248 370925 email : gat@heneb.co.uk

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Cover picture:
Bryn Gwyn stones: Pit 7 with standing stone stump *in situ*

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1 SUMMARY

Evaluation excavation was carried out of an area north of the two standing stones at Bryn Gwyn (PRN 3135, SAM A22) at SH46246693, based on evidence from geophysical survey of the existence of a possible curvilinear feature there. No such feature was present but three standing stone pits were found of which two contained stumps of broken-off standing stones. Two stones lay in an arc in relation to the two extant standing stones that indicated a former stone circle of 8 stones and about 16m diameter. One standing stone was not part of this arc but lay on a different alignment, possibly oriented on the nearby Castell Bryn Gwyn henge.

2 INTRODUCTION

The Bryn Gwyn stones west of Brynsiencyn consist of two very large standing stones, the tallest, c. 4m high, the tallest in Wales. 18th century descriptions record them as being formerly part of a stone circle, which at that time was ruinous and of which descriptions vary but of between 8 to 12 stones and described as of 12-14 yards (11-13m) diameter, internally, by Rowlands in 1723. An account of 1797 (Hutton, 181) says of the stones that 'ignorant country people supposing money was hid under them, recently tore them up'. The largest stone was used as the gable wall of a small cottage, sketched by Skinner in 1802 (Fig. 17). Other accounts mention a 'cromlech' behind the cottage, but this seems to have been the remains of the stone circle, perhaps heaped together after robbing. Whatever, the cottage was still standing in 1817 but it and most of the stones had been cleared to make way for a reorganised field system before 1841, when the Tithe map was produced (Baynes 1910, 65). Two stones survived because they were incorporated in a new field bank. It had been said that it was impossible to estimate where the former stone circle lay because the two surviving stones did not indicate an arc. However, the stones were visited as part of the Cadw Pan-Wales prehistoric funerary and ritual monument survey in 2002 and it was estimated that the circle lay on the north side of the two surviving stones (Smith 2003). An earlier description by the RCAHMW (1937 xlviii) also described slight remains of an outlying bank and ditch of c. 75yds (70m) diameter. No subsequent visits have recognised this feature, but the field is regularly ploughed and it could have been levelled. In 2006 a geophysical survey was carried out for Cadw as a follow-up to the previous site visit (Smith and Hopewell 2007). This provided no evidence of the stone circle but did identify a series of anomalies forming a possible curvilinear enclosure approximately concentric to the possible stone circle and possibly the same as the feature described by the RCAHMW. It also identified the layout of an earlier field system of small, strip-like fields on a different alignment to the modern field boundaries (Fig. 2). One of these boundaries, in the field to the south of the standing stones, can still be seen as a slight earthwork crossing the modern field.

In 2008 a further project for Cadw aimed to evaluate the 2006 geophysical survey indication of a possible outer curvilinear enclosure by excavation of an evaluation trench across its line, north of the standing stones.

Acknowledgements: Thanks go to Cadw for providing funding for the work. This could not have been carried out without the kind agreement of the landowner, Mr R.T. Roberts of Cefn Maesoglan, Brynsiencyn and of the farmer Mr A. Roberts of Bodlew, Gaerwen. The excavation was made possible by the voluntary assistance of Jeff Marples of Pencarnisiog, C. 'Beaver' Hughes of Llanfairfechan and Mathew Jones of Bangor.

3 OBJECTIVES AND METHODS

The main objective was to evaluate the possible curvilinear feature identified on the geophysical survey in 2006. A trench 14m by 4m with an extension 6m by 4m was laid out to

cross the geophysical feature. The trench was of sufficient area to include the estimated arc of the previously described stone circle but stayed outside the area of the Scheduled Ancient Monument, which was a circle of 20m diameter centred on the two standing stones.

The turf and plough soil were removed by machine and the trench then cleaned, planned and features excavated by hand. After excavation the area was backfilled, levelled and compacted by machine and turf re-laid.

The work was carried out between 1st to 5th December 2008 by the author, Richard Cooke and valuable voluntary assistance – see acknowledgements,

4 EXCAVATION RESULTS

Removal of the plough soil of dark brown silt of c. 0.30m depth revealed the underlying subsoil, which consisted of sandy gravel overlaid with patches of cleaner silt over most of the trench. The extension on the western side showed a buried horizon or lower topsoil of very dark brown stony silt similar to the plough soil.

At the northern end of the main trench in the area of the linear geophysical anomaly no obvious archaeological feature was present. The only feature in the right location and alignment was a slight linear feature of mid-brown silt that when excavated proved to be a probable periglacial ice wedge [22] of similar fill to the various mottled patches of silt that overlay the gravel elsewhere in the trench (Fig. 3). There was nothing specific to match with the dark, isolated geophysical anomaly, part of the possible arc of such features that should have been within the trench (Fig. 2).

Removal of the lower topsoil gradually allowed four main features, Pits 3, 6, 7 and 11, to be defined (Fig. 3).

Pit 3 (Fig. 4)

On the surface this was a large sub-circular feature, rather irregular in outline and c. 1.40m in diameter. Its main fill was dark brown friable silt containing occasional coal and 18th/19th century pottery fragments. At this point it was thought to be possibly a rubbish or cess pit associated with the former nearby 18th century cottage. However, gradual excavation showed that lower down the irregular outline resolved into a smaller, well-defined sub-circular pit c. 1.2m diameter, with steep sloping sides and rounded base and overall 0.87m deep below the subsoil surface. Part way down in the fill was a group of sub-angular small boulders. In the lowest part of the pit a large slab of limestone, 0.56m wide, 0.13m thick and 0.5m high, stood upright against the side of the pit (Fig. 4).

The indications were that this was the pit of a former standing stone that had been dug out and removed entire and then backfilled with topsoil and stones. The shape of the pit suggested that the stone had been rounded in cross-section, rather than slab-like so the remaining limestone slab was either just part of the backfill or perhaps a packing stone rather than a broken part of the original standing stone. There was no evidence of any surviving original *in situ* fill and post-medieval material was found throughout although there were also two flint flake fragments (Appendix 1, finds 4 and 5).

Pit 6 (Fig. 5)

In the lower section face at the south edge of the western trench extension was a dense layer of sub-angular stones (17) immediately beneath the plough soil and partly disturbed by ploughing. This at first seemed likely to be an external surface associated with the nearby 18th

century cottage. However, further excavation showed that the stones formed the top fill of a pit [6] of which only a small part lay within the excavated area. This could not be followed further because of the need to respect the scheduled area. The pit had a fairly straight north edge and its limits to the east and west seemed to have been identified, making the pit about 1.30m long in that orientation. The stones (17) filled a wider part of the top of the pit, the lower edge of which one side was present, was almost vertical (Fig. 5). Beneath the stony layer was the top of a large, vertically-set limestone slab. The edges of the slab on all four sides were located, indicating that it was 1.60m long and 0.25m thick. The eastern edge was uncertain because it was obscured in the section face and the edge of the pit was not definitely identified. It is possible that the edge identified at that end was just a broken edge, rather than the original edge of the stone. Probing down the west end of the slab showed, although not with certainty, that the base of the slab was at 0.71m below its broken top (Fig. 5). The top edge of the slab was irregular and had the linear marks of four horizontal drill holes c. 20cm apart.

The stone in the pit appeared to have been the stump of a much taller orthostatic slab that had been snapped off just below plough soil level by digging a shallow pit around it and then by drilling a line of horizontal holes.

Pit 7 (Fig. 6)

This first showed as a large irregular area of dark stony silt, which after gradual removal resolved into the top of a very large pit of ovoid shape in plan, 3.40m long and 1.65m broad, oriented south-west to north-east. The base of the pit was 0.83m deep below the top of the subsoil with a very steep north-west side and a medium-sloping south-east side. The main fill was very dark brown humic silt throughout, but contained a large number of angular fragments of broken schist in the upper part, concentrated towards the west. In the base of the pit was a large vertically-set angular slab of schist [16], and some large fragments of which still lay partly *in situ* (Fig. 3). These and the impression in the pit showed that the stone slab, when complete, had originally been 1.89m long and 0.20m in thickness. The broken piece remained to 0.39m in height.

The stone had been a much taller standing stone that had been dug out on the south side to allow access and then broken off below plough soil level, apparently by hammering. The fill contained a scatter of 18th-19th century pottery sherds, concentrated in the upper part. Around the base of the stone, which was left *in situ*, was a more compact stony layer that seemed likely to be original packing material for the standing stone but it did not contain any artefacts or charcoal.

Pit 11 (Fig. 7)

This pit was only partly exposed, continuing beyond the edge of the trench but if symmetrical was sub-circular c. 1.10m diameter and 0.30m deep, with steep sides and flat-bottomed. Its upper fill (15) contained some 18th-19th century pottery and several fragments of limestone up to 0.20m long. Its lower fill (12) was relatively stone-free dark-brown silt.

There was no evidence to suggest a function for the pit but could have been a shallow stone hole for a stone removed during agricultural improvement.

5 ARTEFACTUAL EVIDENCE

See Appendix 1. All the finds came from contexts that were disturbed or related to the 18th century cottage and its later demolition. These comprised mainly pieces of dark brown glazed red-bodied kitchenware and a scatter of fragments of fine table ware of cream or duck-egg

blue glazed earthenware. There were a few roofing-type slate fragments although the cottage itself seems to have been thatched to judge by a sketch made by Skinner in 1802 (Fig. 17). There were 2 pieces of clay tobacco pipe, one a bowl of late 18th century type and one glass wine bottle spout of the first half of the 19th century. There were a few pieces of iron including a fragment of cauldron. Some samples of fragments of lime mortar, including some adhering to local schist stone must have come from the demolished cottage.

The fill of Pit 3, although being late backfill, produced 3 pieces of flint flakes that are the only objects that probably relate to activity connected with the stone circle itself. Two were undiagnostic, one of them burnt but one was a broken small flake that was probably punch-struck with a plain platform and had two pressure-flaked facets so was probably of Neolithic date. The flint of this latter flake was probably nodular and imported. A broken flint pebble and a possibly struck fragment of black chert were also found close by during the geophysical survey in 2006.

6 DISCUSSION

Pits 3, 6 and 7 were the sockets for standing stones of which those in 6 and 7 were narrow slabs while that in 3 was more pillar-like. The location of pits 3 and 7 fit closely to the arc of a circle or slight ellipse that includes the two existing standing stones, with a diameter about 16 to 17m (Fig. 14). This also fits with the orientation of the two flat slabs, facing into the centre of the circle. The distance apart of the two stones in pits 3 and 7 and those of the two existing standing stones are quite similar, c. 6.3m and 5.7m, centre to centre and this indicates a circle of 8 stones. The types of the four stones now known are complementary in terms of type, as slab or pillar, which suggests that the circle as whole could have been of a deliberate design of alternate slabs and pillars. This size of stone circle falls into the middle of the distribution of sizes of all circles and close to the overall mean (Burl 1976, 374-5).

The earliest realistic illustration of the circle, by Rowlands in 1723 shows only six stones but unequally spaced so some may have fallen or been removed and he estimated that there were about 9 originally (Fig. 15). The eight now estimated is reasonable and Burl shows that of all stone circles even numbers of stones are more frequent, suggesting that symmetry was a desirable part of the design (*ibid* 40-1).

The position and alignment of the slab in pit 6 bears no obvious relation to the stone circle but there is always the possibility of other features being present. The results confirm the 18th century description of the site as a stone circle and shows that some remains of the stones still survive. If the interpretation is correct then four more standing stone pits possibly with stumps of stones still exist to be discovered, two within the field and two beneath the hedge bank.

The use of two quite different types of rock could be significant because they are not randomly sourced, e.g. from erratics but derive from *in situ* rock and so were probably deliberately selected. Schist is available splitting naturally from low outcrops not far away to the north-east. Limestone is more difficult to obtain from 1km away to the south-east, where there are disused quarries, and its collection would probably have entailed more serious extraction.

The idea of alternate shapes of standing stone is not supported by the view shown by Rowlands, of which only one looks slab-like. Certainly the stones were not of alternating rock types as the eastern of the two extant standing stones is also of schist, although of a different type to the western slab, and probably a glacial erratic.

In retrospect it can be seen that the geophysical survey did show anomalies where pits 3 and 7 were (Fig. 14) but these were too vague and isolated features to be identifiable against the general background. However, reviewing the survey evidence does not show any similar evidence to indicate pits where the suspected two other stones are projected to make up a circle of symmetrically placed stones. To some extent this depends on what the pits were backfilled with after destruction or robbing of the stones, so the pits could still be present.

Burl records about 900 stone circles in the Britain and Ireland, with several areas of concentration, but not in Wales where circles are relatively few and widely dispersed. In north-west Wales there are only two extant examples of large open circles, these being the Druid's Circle at Penmaenmawr and the circle at Bryn Gwyn. There are smaller circles around Penmaenmawr and at Cerrig Arthur, Meirionnydd and another possible at Pant y Llan, Arthog, Meirionnydd. There were also two probable examples, both destroyed, at Cae Coch and Cwm Mawr, both near Tremadog, Gwynedd. There are other circles with more numerous smaller stones that have more in common with ring cairns, to be found at Llecheiddior and nearby Hengwm, Llanaber, Meirionnydd. The open circles of large stones at Penmaenmawr and Bryn Gwyn are distinctive and both lie close to other major monuments. At Penmaenmawr there are large ring cairns and other types of cairns nearby and Bryn Gwyn is close to the probable henge of Castell Bryn Gwyn, 300m to the north-east where pottery suggests use in the Later Neolithic (Wainwright 1962). Further to the east at Tre'r Dryw Bach another large circle, of smaller stones than at Bryn Gwyn, was also reported by 18th century visitors but has since been cleared away. Study of the topography and of aerial photographs has failed to find any hint of the location of this second circle and it might be difficult to ever re-locate as its smaller stones may have left no obvious pits.

Rowlands and other 18th century visitors also noted groups of smaller stones to the south-east of the Bryn Gwyn circle (Fig. 15) but these have been cleared away and may never be re-located. Rowlands also records a large cairn mid-way between the Bryn Gwyn stones and Castell Bryn Gwyn. This would have been about where there is a house, Bryn Gwyn Bach, now and it might have been levelled for the house construction. Further to the west was probably another megalithic monument also cleared but surviving as the name Maen Hir farm.

Anglesey has a considerable number of chambered tombs and a concentration in the south suggesting that the area was well-settled and some kind of ceremonial centre there would be expected, separate from that at Llandygai, across the Straits. The henge at Castell Bryn Gwyn may have been such a focus. This, and the Bryn Gwyn circle, are situated on a low ridge close to the shallow valley of the River Braint, to the north-west. The seaward end of this is now blocked and diverted by the Newborough dune field built up as a result of longshore drift and occasional major sand-blow episodes. At the time of the postglacial sea-level maximum the Braint was probably a more open estuary that might have been a navigable creek, like that of the River Cefni to the north. Its presence may have had a connection with Castell Bryn Gwyn and the valley deposits there have some potential for environmental work.

The excavations at Castell Bryn Gwyn showed that it was being used during the Later Neolithic and a functional connection between it and the Bryn Gwyn circle seem very likely. Castell Bryn Gwyn appears to have had two opposed entrances, one to the south-west and one to the north-east (Lynch 1991, 100-3). The south-western entrance faces towards the Bryn Gwyn circle and this feature seems to have been recognised by Rowlands (Fig. 15) and Stukeley (Fig. 16). With the more accurate results of the two excavations it can be more confidently said that the alignment through the entrances and the centre of Castell Bryn Gwyn passes through the centre of the Bryn Gwyn circle (Fig. 18). Geophysical survey at Castell Bryn Gwyn in 2006 looked for a possible avenue leading from this entrance without result, although the results as a whole were not very productive so are not definitive. One possible piece of evidence is provided by Pit 6 at the Bryn Gwyn stones, the standing stone that has no

recognisable relation to the design of the circle but which does lie on an alignment that coincides approximately with Castell Bryn Gwyn. In a general sense the overall alignment between Castell Bryn Gwyn and the Bryn Gwyn circle, south-west to north-east, the midsummer sunrise/midwinter sunset axis, is one that is significant in the layout of many other circles and henges, such as the Druid's Circle.

The lack of dating material from the newly discovered standing stone pits is disappointing but the confirmation of the circle itself is a major advance and the discovery of Pit 6 raises further questions and suggests that there could be other features associated with the circle than the stone pits themselves. Further work seems justified to identify the remaining stone pits and any other features, and these could produce dating evidence. Castell Bryn Gwyn itself deserves further investigation and re-assessment and study of the valley deposits could provide a picture of the environment and periods of activity in the area.

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APPENDIX 1

ARTEFACTS

Small finds

- 1 Burnt flint flake frag, 19x14x2mm. Context 2 (Cleaning subsoil surface).
- 2 Small holed stone or burnt clay piece, probably accidental. 36x29x12mm. Context 5 (Top fill of Pit 7).
- 3 Pce of partly cemented carbon dust, not pottery. Probably accidental. Context 10 (Top fill of Pit 7).
- 4 Mid-grey flint flake frag, 29x22x9mm. Context 4 (Fill of Pit 3).
- 5 Butt of a small thin flint flake with 2 pressure-flaked facets on the non-bulbar face. Probably punch struck. Fine, fresh translucent dark grey flint with some possibly nodular cortex and so possibly imported. 13mm long (incomplete) x12x3mm. Context 4 (Fill of Pit 3).
- 6 Sample frag from stone [16] in pit 7, for ID. Context 16.

Common Finds

Context 2 (Cleaning subsoil surface)

Fe Cauldron frag
Un ID frag

Pottery Kitchenware

11 frags Buckley type crock incl 1 horizontal lug handle
5 pces fine dark brown inner and outer glaze, red body jugs or vases 1 with rolled rim.

Pottery Tableware

15 Cream and light grey inner and outer glaze, thin fake porcelain small bowls, jugs or teacups
2 red-brown glaze with blue horizontal band.
1 mid-grey glaze with blue band
2 duck-egg blue glazed with applied yellow motif – novelty ware

Clay tobacco pipe

1 bowl frag, about 1780

Glass bottle

1 wine spout, deep string mould, before about 1840.

Other

- 2 frags red tile/Buckley ware
- 1 shattered quartz frag
- 1 small cinder
- 1 frag roof slate
- 2 frags cockle shell

Context 4 (Fill of Pit 3)

Fe

- 1 Strap frag
- 1 Un ID frag

Pottery Kitchenware

- 10 frags Buckley type crock
- 9 frags fine dark brown inner and outer glaze, red body

Pottery Tableware

- 7 frags creamware, 1 with painted foliage deco. 1 with emerald green wash.
- 10 frags duck-egg blue bowl/teacup.

Clay tobacco pipe

- 1 pce stem

Other

- 3 frags lime plaster/mortar
- 6 frags thick roofing slate. 1 with curving lower edge.
- 1 mica schist frag
- 1 quartzose heat fractured cobble frag
- 2 sandstone pebbles
- 1 possible small hammer stone. Flat ovoid pebble 95mm long, of hard igneous rock with battering on one edge only, could be late damage.

Context 8 (Cleaning over top of fill of Pit 7)

Pottery Kitchenware

- 3 frags Buckley type crock
- 5 frags fine dark brown inner and outer glaze, red body.
- 1 frag mid-brown mottled (rolled rim)

Pottery Tableware

- 2 frags cream plate with Prussian blue edge 'flashing' (as in 1st phase Dean St)
- 1 frag duck egg blue with raised moulded deco. and thin orange edge band.
- 1 frag with green painted foliage deco.
- 1 cream frag.

Bone

- Sheep tooth
- Burnt frags incl 1 prob cock spur

Context 10 (Top of fill of Pit 7)

Pot

Kitchenware

3 frags fine dark brown inner and outer glaze, red body.

Stone

1 sample frag from stone [16]

Context 12 (Upper fill of Pit 11)

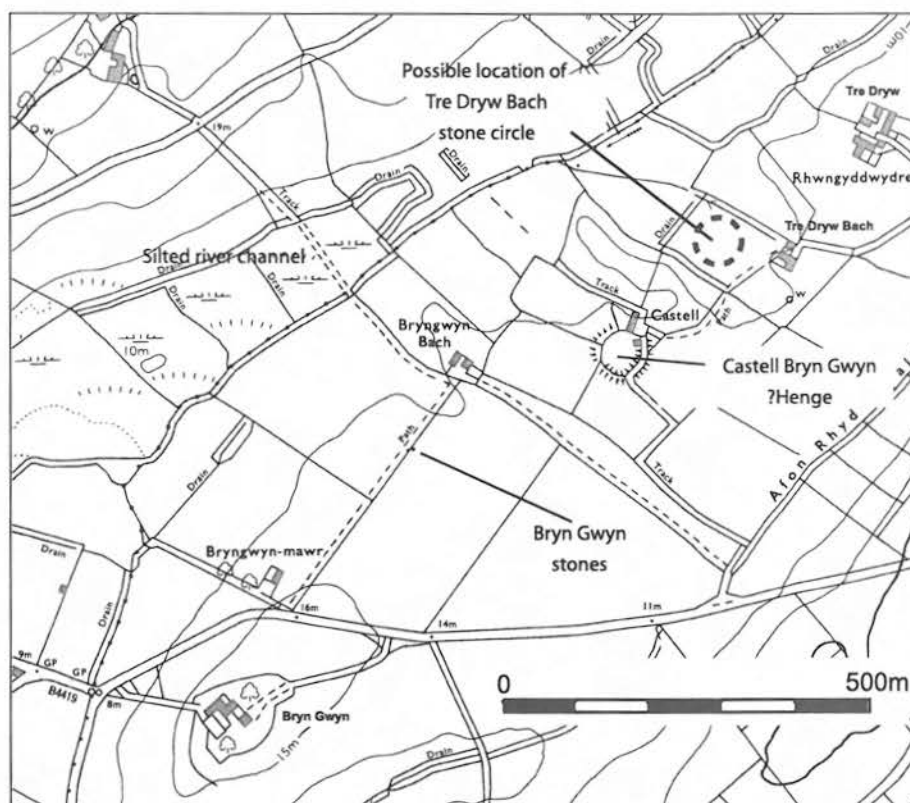
Pottery Kitchenware

1 frag Buckley type crock

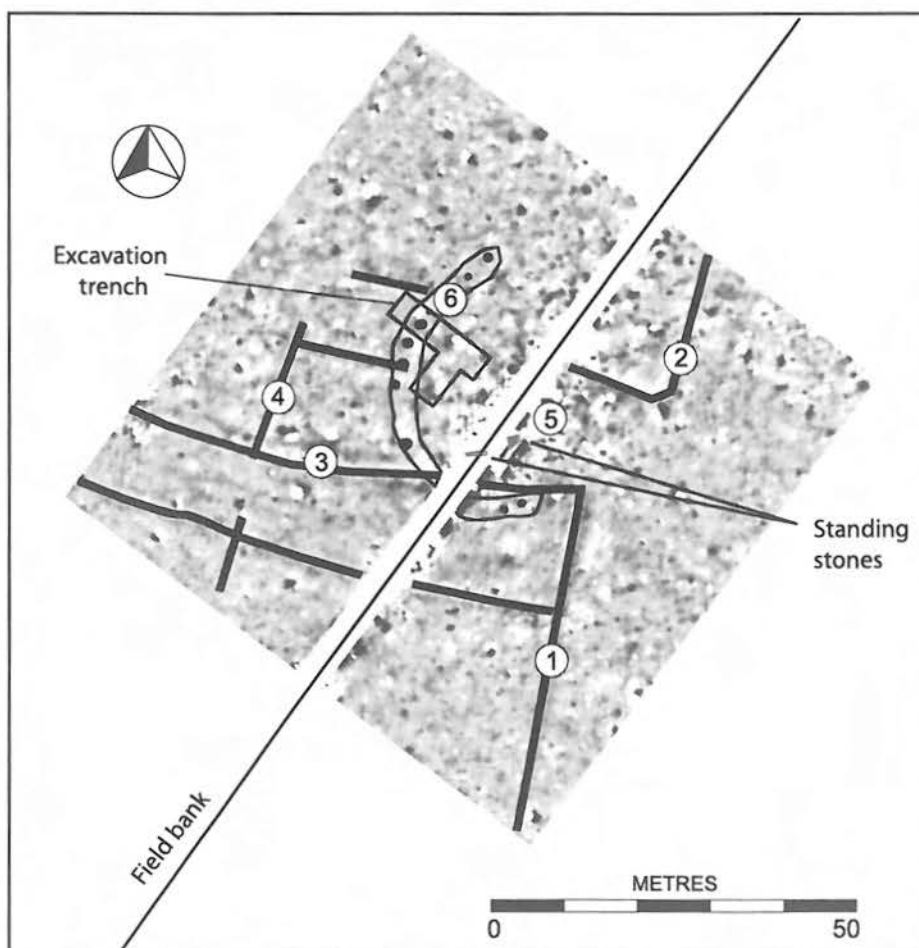
Pottery Tableware

1 frag duck egg blue

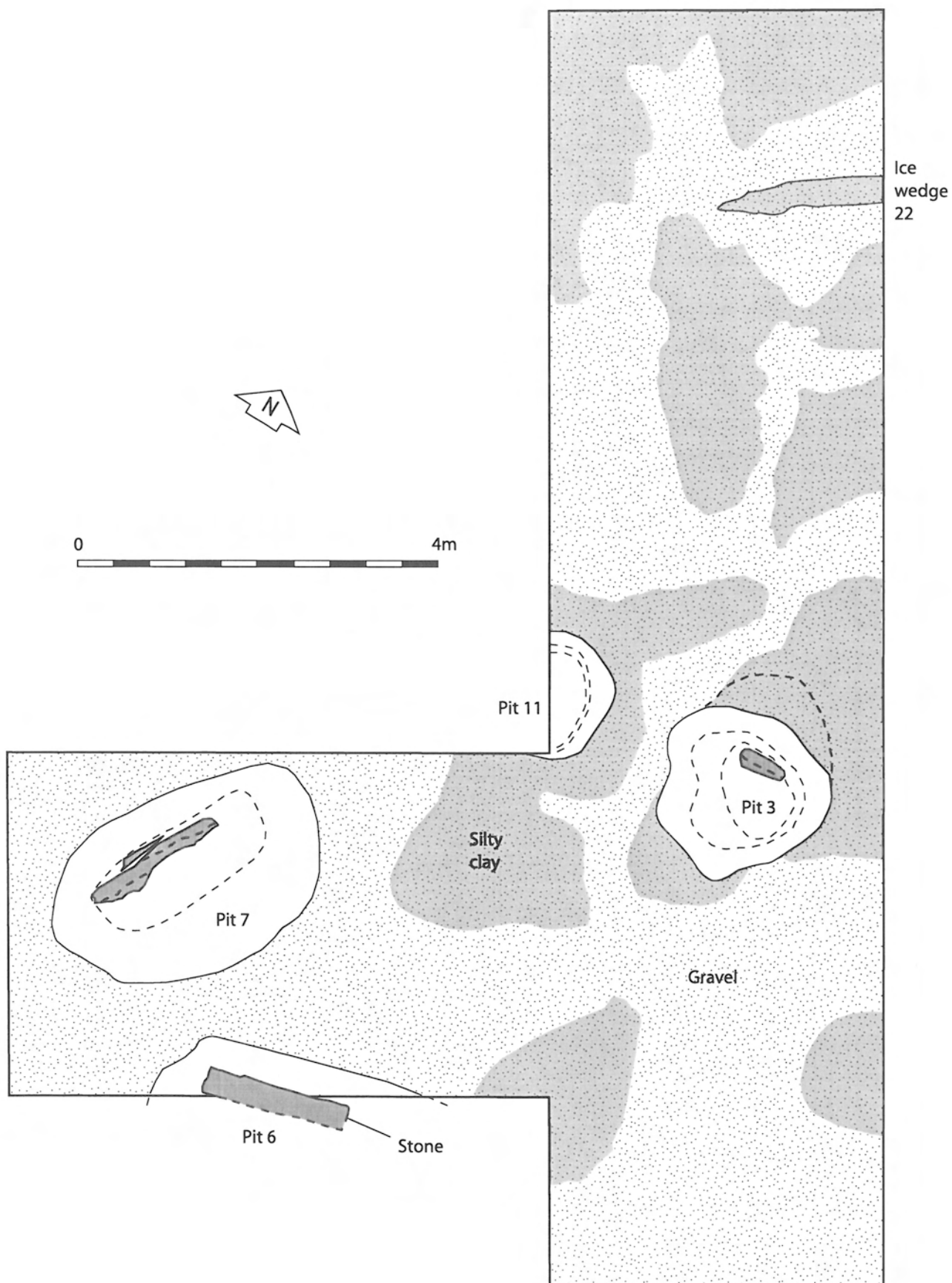
1 frag cream



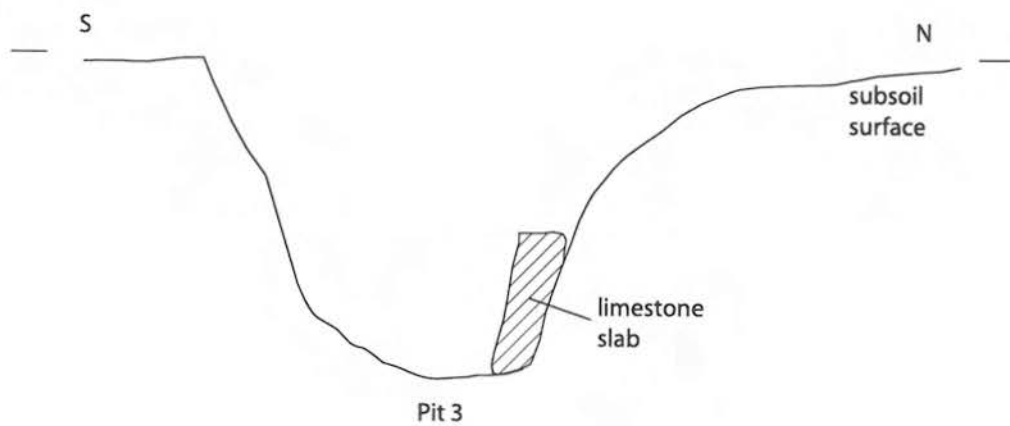
Bryn Gwyn Stone circle Fig. 1 The location of the site in relation to the surrounding landscape.
Based on OS 1:10,000 scale map. © Crown copyright. All rights reserved. Licence number AL 100020895



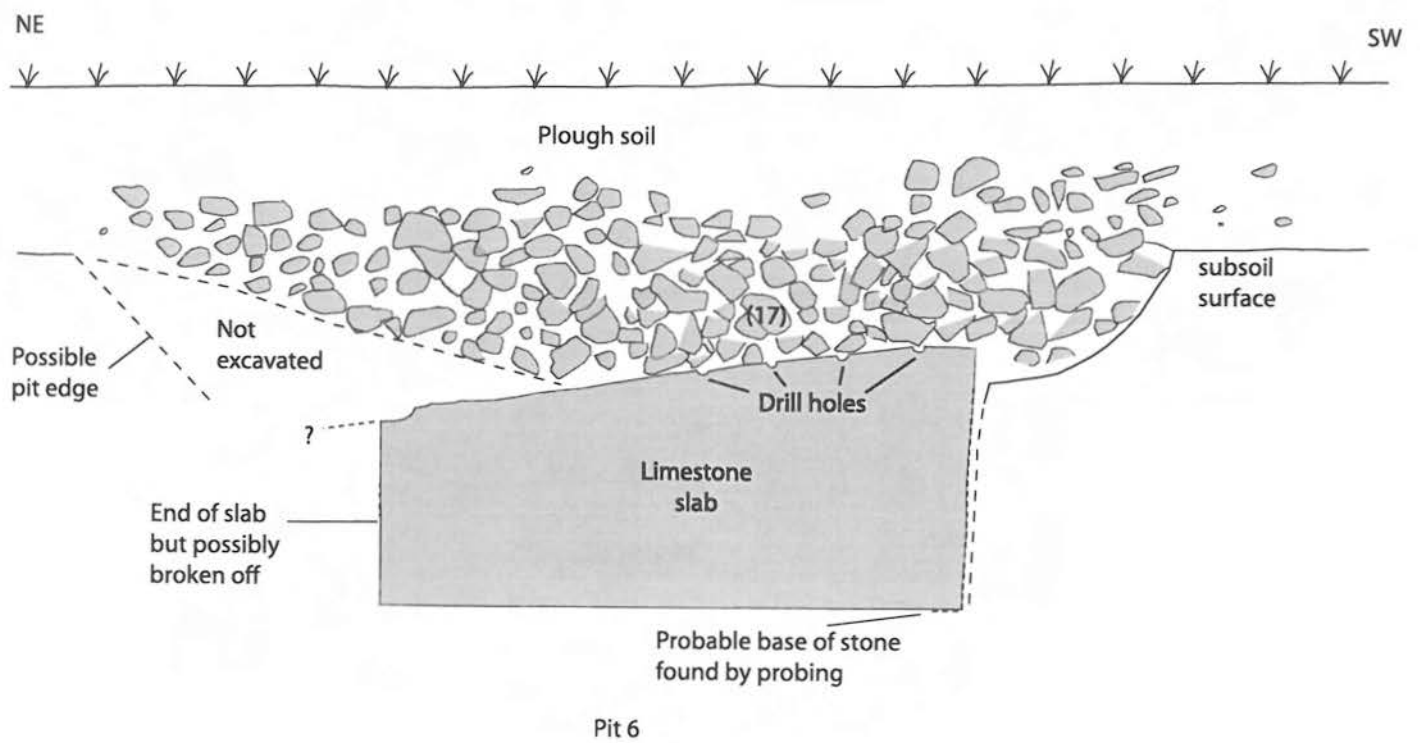
Bryn Gwyn Stone circle Fig. 2 Gradiometer survey interpretation (2006)
and location of excavation trench (2008). Red: standing stones



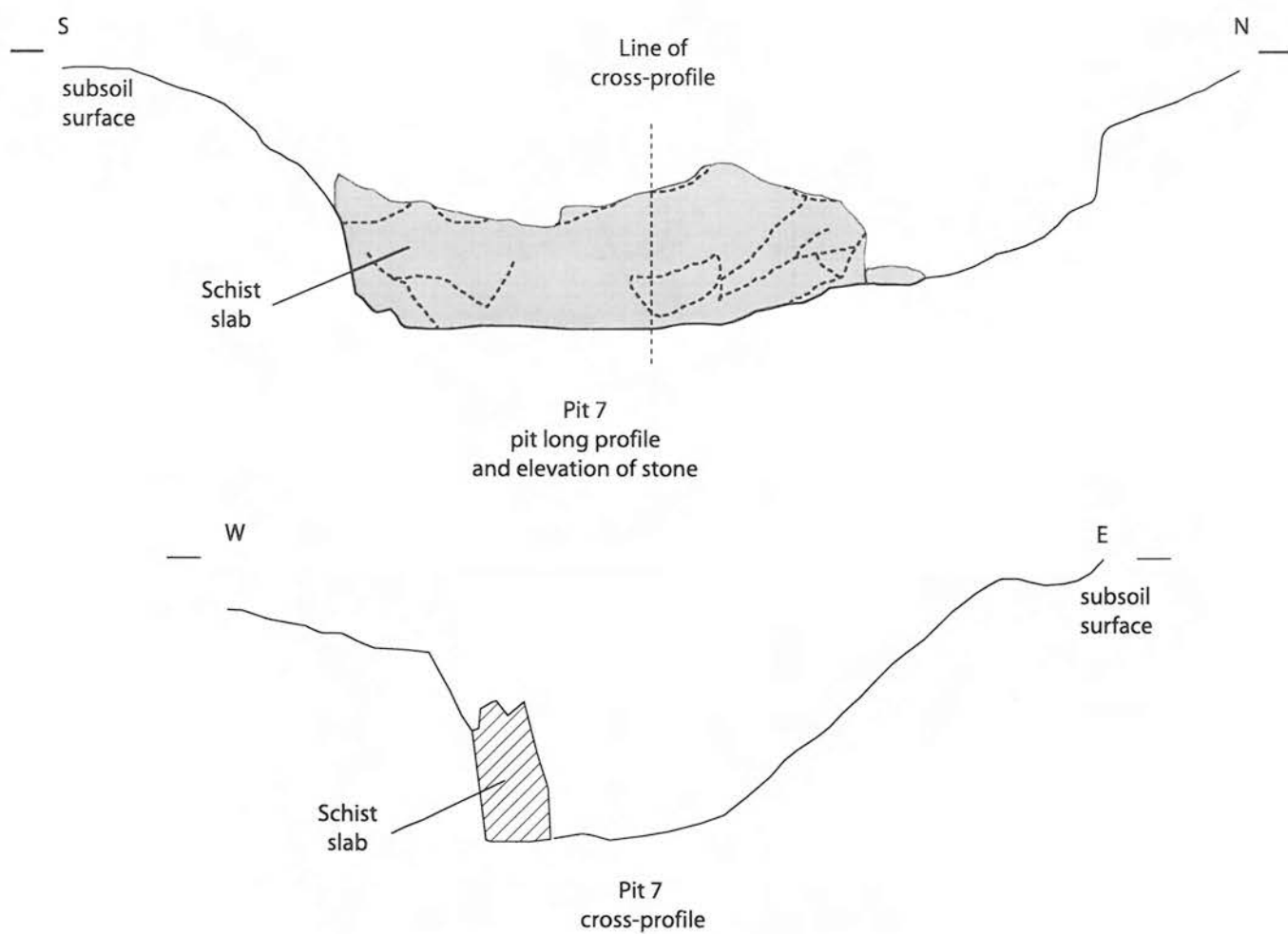
Bryn Gwyn Stone circle Fig. 3 General plan of excavated trench



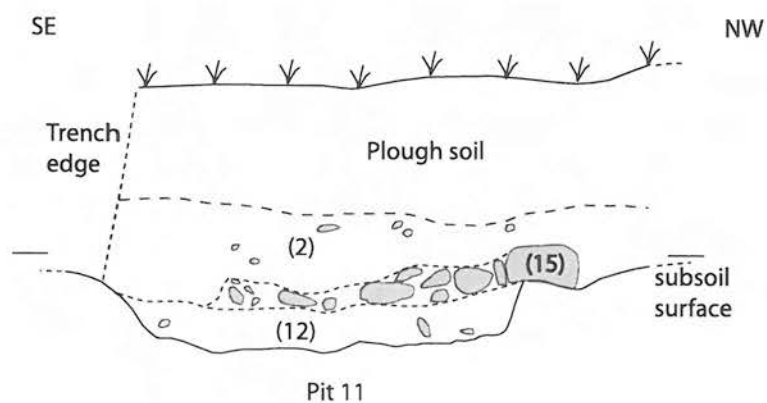
Bryn Gwyn Stone cricle Fig. 4 Pit 3 profile



Bryn Gwyn Stones Fig. 5 Pit 6 section



Bryn Gwyn Stone circle Fig. 6 Pit 7 section and profile



Bryn Gwyn Stone circle Fig. 7 Pit 11 section



Bryn Gwyn Stone circle Fig. 8 The standing stones, from the east, winter



Bryn Gwyn Stone circle Fig. 9 The standing stones, from the north, summer



Bryn Gwyn Stone circle Fig. 10 Pit 3 from the south, with limestone slab in situ. 1m and 30cm scales



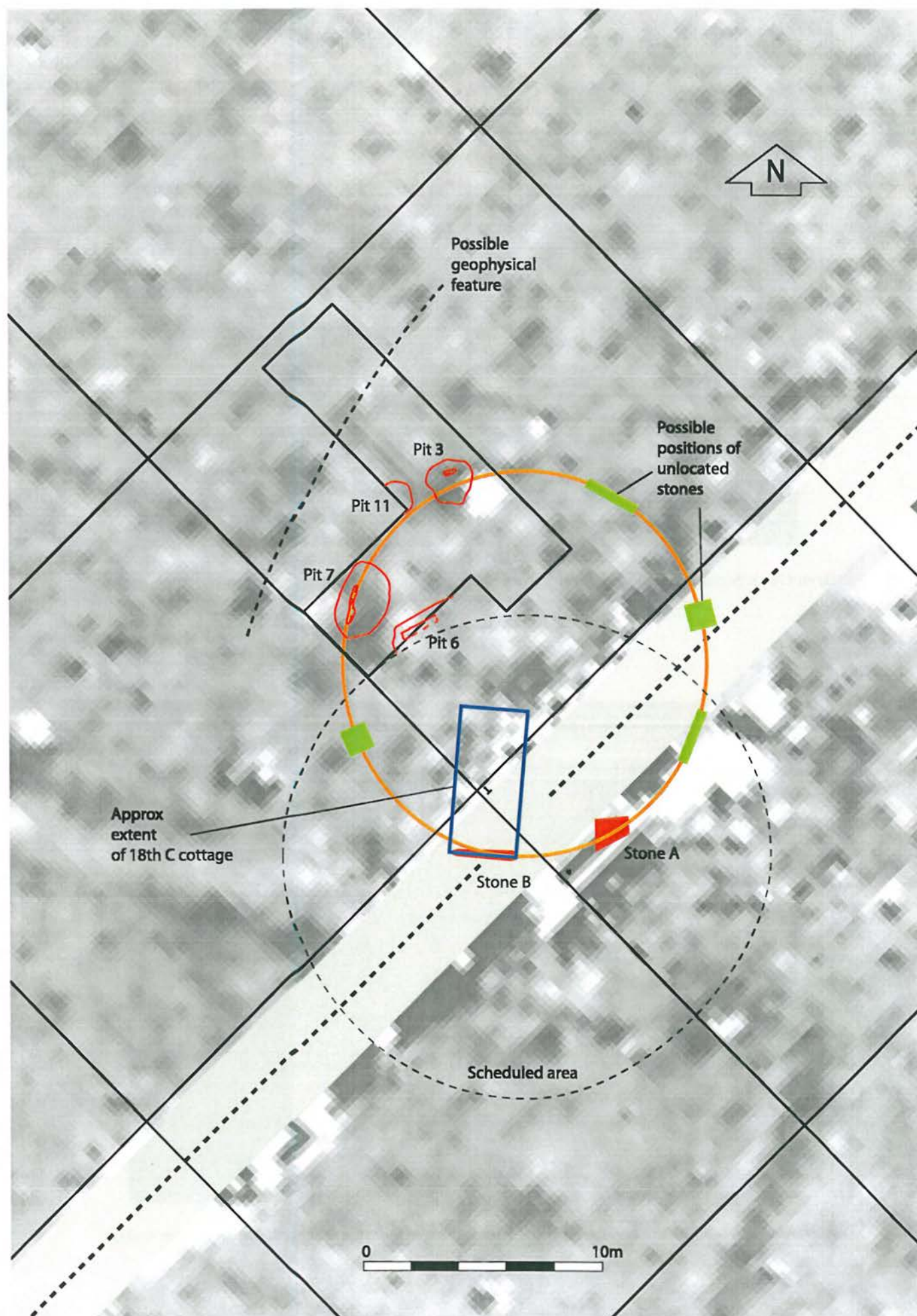
Bryn Gwyn Stone circle Fig. 11 Pit 6, vertical view of top of slab in situ. 30cm scale



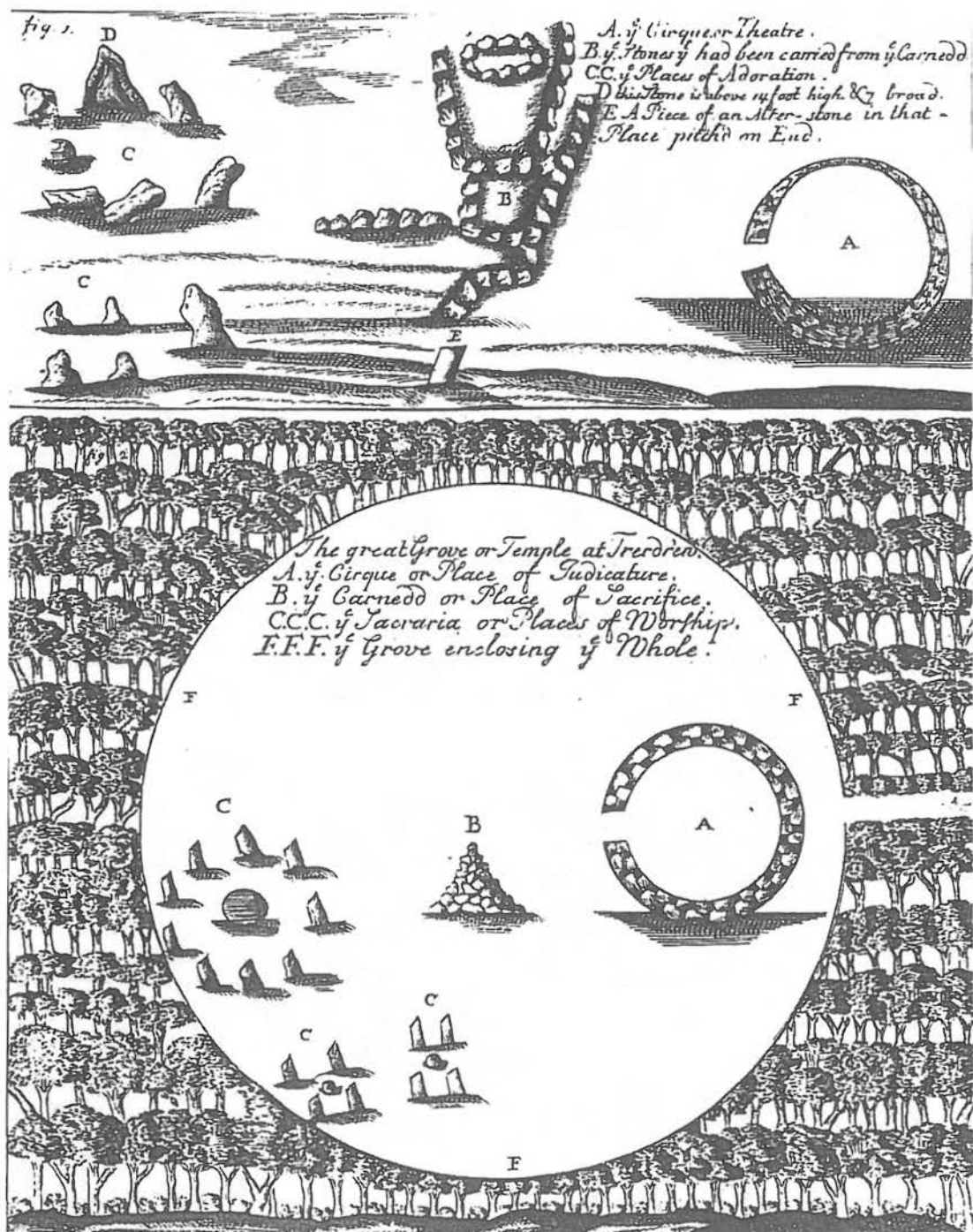
Bryn Gwyn Stone circle Fig. 12 Pit 7 from the east, with schist slab in situ. 1m and 30cm scales



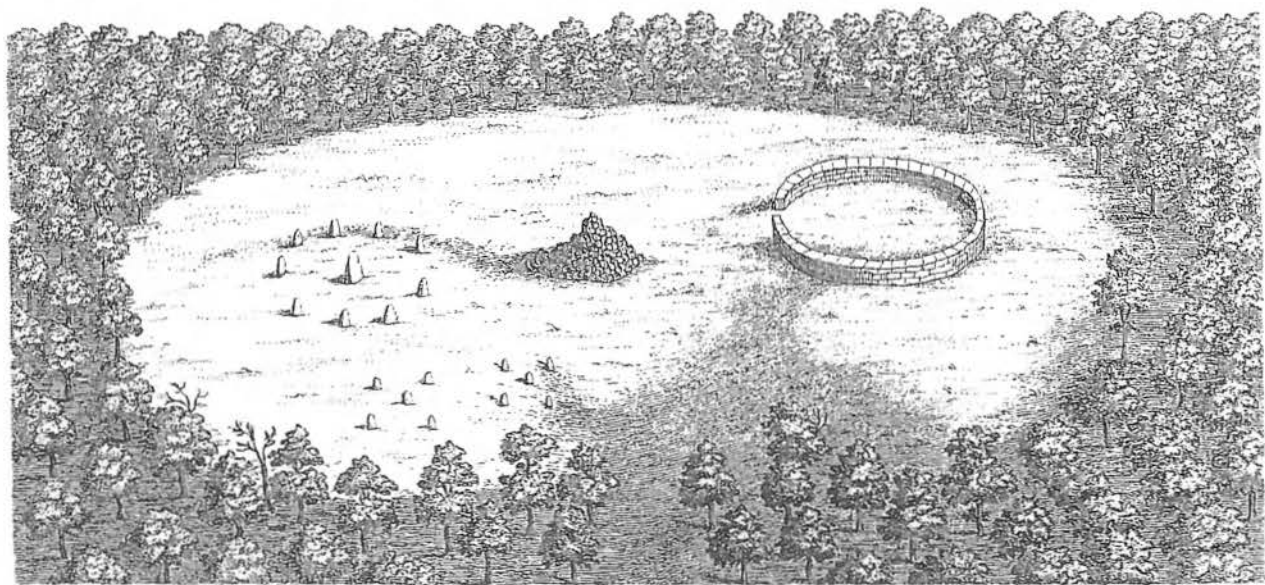
Bryn Gwyn Stone circle Fig. 13 Pit 11 from the north-east, excavated. 1m and 30cm scales



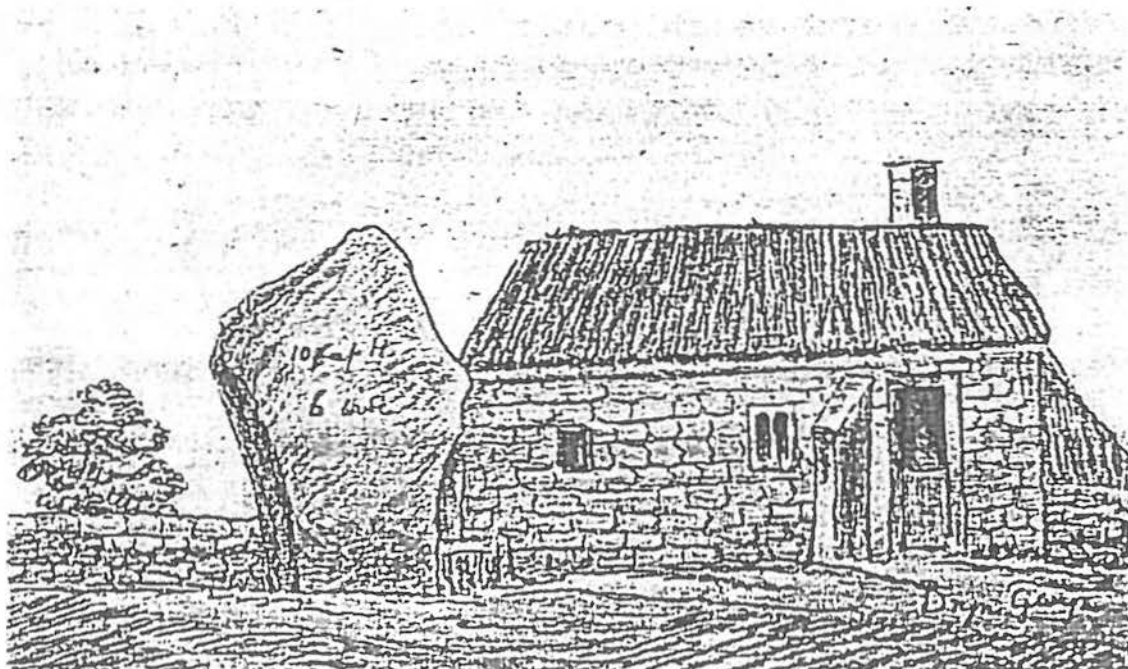
Bryn Gwyn Stone circle Fig. 14 Location of standing stones, trench, pits and projected stone circle in relation to gradiometer survey



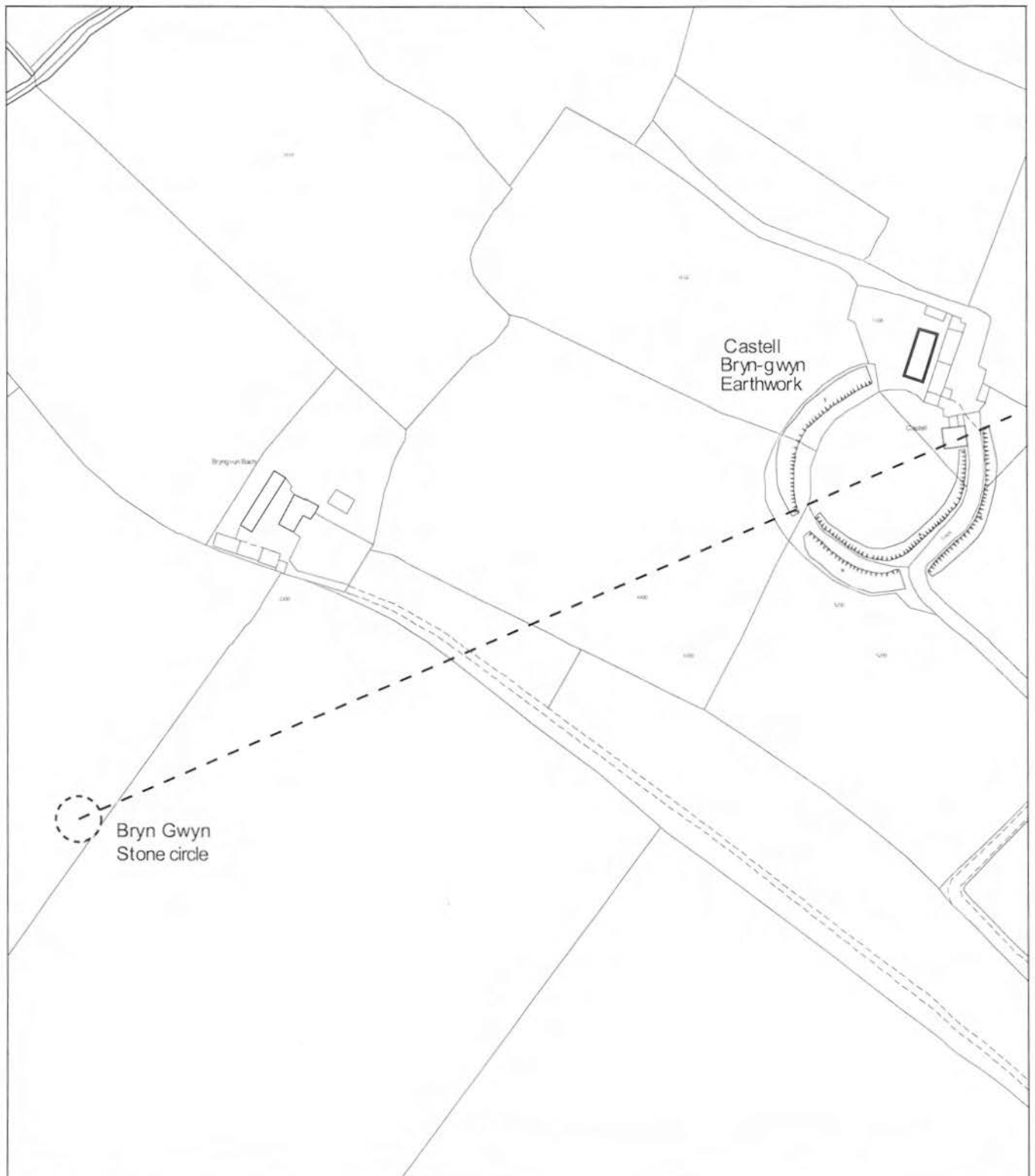
Bryn Gwyn stone circle Fig. 15 Drawing of the Bryn Gwyn stones (C) and Castell Bryn Gwyn (A) and area by Rowlands (1723)

*W. Stukeley delin.**J. Harris fecit*

Bryn Gwyn Stone circle Fig. 16 Illustration of the Bryn Gwyn stone circle, cairn and Castell Bryn Gwyn by Stukeley (1724) based on Rowlands drawing



Bryn Gwyn Stone circle Fig. 17 Drawing of the cottage and smaller of the two standing stones from the north-east, by the Rev. John Skinner (1802)



Bryn Gwyn Stone circle Fig. 18 Plan of the stone circle in relation to the orientation of the entrances at Castell Bryn Gwyn. The gap shown by the Ordnance Survey is slightly different to that on the more detailed excavation plan (Wainwright 1962).
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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