# PRS REPLACEMENT, MENAI BRIDGE, YNYS MÔN

# SERVICE TRENCH WATCHING BRIEF



Archaeological Watching Brief

GAT Project No. 2061 Report No. 833 October 2009

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# REPORT NO. 833

Prepared for

Wales & West Utilities

October 2009

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# PRS REPLACEMENT, MENAI BRIDGE, YNYS MÔN:

# ARCHAEOLOGICAL DESK BASED ASSESSMENT & WATCHING BRIEF (G2061)

### Summary

*Gwynedd Archaeological Trust (GAT) was commissioned by Wales and West Utilities to complete a programme of archaeological works during a PRS replacement scheme at a gas decompression station in Menai Bridge, Ynys Môn. GAT monitored the initial groundworks, including the excavation of a culvert, foundations for two control kiosks and excavation slots for connecting the kiosks. In tandem with this, GAT completed a deskbased assessment (DBA) of the area to establish the historical use of the site as a gasworks in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.* 

It was expected that observations made during the watching brief would determine whether any structural remains of the gasworks existed at foundation level and it was hoped that the desk-based assessment could identify the functional use of the gasworks buildings identified on the historical maps of the area. It was unclear prior to this stage to what extent the gasworks had survived at subsurface level and it was expected that foundation material would be exposed during the groundworks/watching brief. A recent project by GAT (G1880 GAT Report **660**) on the site of an early gasworks in Bangor had identified subterranean features that had survived the demolition of the works, including the base of the gas holders, metal pipes and brick-built culverts.

The DBA confirmed that the gasworks at this location were in use from 1858 until 1952, after which the holding tanks and ancillary structures (including a house), were demolished, to be replaced by the gas decompression unit. Separately, the southern end of the works were replaced by a water pumping station and the northern end by a retaining wall during the A5/A5025 road improvement works during the latter half of the twentieth century.

Evidence for the gasworks was identified during the watching brief at the northeastern end of the site, where foundation level structures were recorded. The exact function of these structures could not be determined, but were interpreted as remnants of the original series of interlinked buildings occupying the central and eastern end of the gasworks enclosure. No other specific structures were identified, except for the upstanding remains of the southwestern boundary wall of the gasworks. The culvert route was excavated through the purported location of the southern gas holding tank but no specific evidence of the structures was identified; it appeared that the structures had been removed and the general area infilled with demolition and imported material. No known historic buildings were expected at the location of the kiosks and the watching brief confirmed that this area contained demolition and/or imported material.

# **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

Gwynedd Archaeological Trust (GAT) was commissioned by Wales and West Utilities to complete a programme of archaeological works during a PRS replacement scheme at a gas decompression station in Menai Bridge, Ynys Môn (NGR SH55347204; figure 01; plates 01 to 05).

The site was the former location of a gasworks, commissioned in 1858 and closed in 1952. It was unclear, prior to groundworks, the extent to which the former station had survived at subsurface level and it was expected that foundation material could be exposed during the groundworks/watching brief.

The groundworks area comprised an existing gas decompression station and environs (total area c. 102.0m<sup>2</sup>). The groundworks monitored by GAT included:

• excavation and installation of a culvert across main entrance

- excavation of a temporary access road across main entrance;
- excavation of a compound area to the south of the existing decompression station;
- the excavation of two foundation platforms for control kiosks, located within the compound area (total platform area: 20.4 m<sup>2</sup>);
- supplementary service identification trenches

Other groundworks not monitored by GAT included:

- Vegetation clearance
- Trial holes for IP, MP, LP outlet mains/excavate mains/ Trial holes for IP, MP, LP main connections
- Demolition of existing decompression station

A mitigation brief was not prepared for this work by Gwynedd Archaeological Planning Services (GAPS), but recommendations were given for an archaeological watching brief, preceded by a desk-based assessment; GAPS also monitored the project from inception to completion. Reference was made to the guidelines and definitions specified in *Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Watching Brief* (Institute of Field Archaeologists, 1994, rev. 2001).

### 2.0 METHODOLOGY

#### 2.1 Fieldwork

The site was visited during the initial groundworks (April and June 2009).

All exposed excavations were monitored and a photographic record was completed using a Nikon D40 SLR; GAT pro-formas were used to record on-site observations.

#### 2.2 Desk based assessment (DBA)

As well as observations made on site, a desktop study was completed using primary and secondary sources (including printed literature and archive material) in the following locations: Gwynedd Archaeological Trust Historic Environment Record, Ynys Môn Archives (County Record Office, Shire Hall, Glanhwfa Road, Llangefni, Ynys Môn LL77 7TW), Menai Bridge Library (Wood Street, Menai Bridge LL59 5AS) and the Gwynedd Archive Services (Swyddfa'r Cyngor, Caernarfon, Gwynedd LL55 1SH).

Preparation of full archive report (project number G2061).

### 3. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The gasworks in Menai Bridge were in use from 1858 (Williams, 1988:169) until closure in 1952 (Jones and Reeve, 1978: 126).

The production and use of coal gas arrived in North Wales in 1812, when a cotton factory near Mold was lit by gas. Public street lighting came to Newtown in 1818, Holywell in 1824 and Wrexham in 1827 (Dodd, 1990: 202). Coal gas was a by-product of the coking process and was introduced in the UK in the 1790s as an illuminating gas by the Scottish inventor William Murdoch and became very widely used for lighting, cooking, heating and powering gas engines. The main elements of a gasworks were a retort house for heating the coal to allow distillation, a purifier for cleaning the gas and extracting by-products and a gas-holder to store the gas. The gas was moved through the system by exhausters, a fan system driven by a steam engine (before electric power was available), so there would also be an engine and boiler house. A coal store was also required along with a tank for collecting by-products removed from the gas.

Very few remains of the earliest gasworks survive nationally, because they were mainly in urban areas and were soon redeveloped (GAT Report 660: 05). No comprehensive assessment of remains has been undertaken, so a complete inventory of comparable works is not currently possible (*ibid.*).

Coal gas production and use did not arrive in Ynys Môn in 1850, when a gasworks was built in Holyhead to provide lighting for the Admiralty Pier, railway docks and warehouses, followed by street lighting in 1856 (Jones and Reeve, 1978: 49).

It is not known where Menai Bridge Gasworks obtained the coal for gas production but there might be a short-lived connection with the Ynys Môn Coal Industry. Coal was dug in the Malltraeth-Pentre Berw area. The Nant mine opened in 1857. Coal from that mine was tested at Beaumaris Gasworks and "yielded more gas than coal from Newcastle and as much as coal from Lancashire" (Williams, 1988:137). Earlier deposits of "good" coal gas were tapped in Flintshire in 1858.

The gasworks in Menai Bridge was built in 1858 and was run by a private enterprise, *The Menai Bridge Gas & Coke Co.*, which put the gasworks up for sale in 1873 (Jones and Reeve, 1978: 49). It is not known to what use the gasworks were put at this stage, but street lighting was not introduced until 1885 and then only for winter use (Anthony: 28-29).

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1877, the gasworks in Menai Bridge were sold to a Mr. Robert Algeo (civil engineer), by a "Mr. John Pritchard & Others" for £1,100 (Gwynedd Archive Services XD21/1-193 and Ynys Môn Archives WM/391/1-5). The conveyance document lists "The Gas House Messuage or Dwelling House, Retort House (central functional building of a gas works. Coal is roasted in retorts producing gas and coke), Coal and Coke Sheds, Tanks, Cisterns and Other Buildings". The total area at this time was 1 Rood 19 Perches. A further 12 Perches was added in 1887 giving an area of 1 Rood 31 Perches (one rood = 0.25 acres; one perch = 3.0 m).

The 1889 First Edition Ordnance Survey (OS) 25" map of the area shows the gasworks within a square shaped enclosure with the A5 to the immediate north and the coastline to the immediate south. A wooded area is located to the east of the gasworks and a series of tracks, leading to the gasworks, to the west. The plot layout includes two holding tanks, a series of interlinked buildings occupying the centre and eastern end of the enclosure and a rectangular structure at the southern end of the plot. Apart from the holding tanks, it is not possible to determine the function of individual buildings.

In 1896 The Menai Bridge Gasworks was sold to the Holyhead and North Wales Gas and Water Corporation Ltd.; the sale being completed on 12<sup>th</sup> February 1897 (XD21/1/1-93). There must have been a problem over some of the land involved in the sale because in a letter dated 11<sup>th</sup> May 1896, Mr. Algeo describes building work carried out to widen the retort house and the building of a wall as an easement along the ditch. Although Algeo has been in possession of the easement he does not claim it as his freehold (Gwynedd Records XCV/367-8). In the indenture documenting the sale, there is mention of Robert Algeo and his executors being authorised to, "make and store gas and divers other products and to deal in and manufacture gasometers, stoves and other apparatus and appliances" (Gwynedd Records XCV/367-8).

The 1900 Second Edition OS 25" map of the area, shows that the building distribution is similar to the First Edition, but the rectangular building at the southern end of the plot has increased in size and a small building has been added next to a holding tank and

another small building added to but detached from the interlinked buildings occupying the centre and eastern end of the enclosure. The letter dated 11<sup>th</sup> May 1896, written by Mr. Algeo, describing the widening of retort house, suggests that the rectangular building at the southern end of the plot was the retort house as this is the only building to have increased in size between the publication of the First and Second Edition OS 25" maps of the area. The series of tracks leading to the gasworks from the west have been consolidated into a single track approaching from the west (still in use in a truncated form).

The 1914 Third Edition 25" map of the area contains additional buildings at the northern end of the site (close to one of the holding tanks and an enlarged building at the northeastern corner of the group of interlinked buildings).

Gas production and supply was nationalised in 1949 and the development of a natural gas grid ended the small scale production of town gas by small local companies and the Menai Bridge Gasworks was closed in 1952 (Jones and Reeve, 1978: 126). The new North Wales Gas Grid was inaugurated on 28<sup>th</sup> November 1957 by HRH Prince Philip at Cae Glan y Môr near Menai Bridge. By the 1970's, the gasworks site had been converted into a gas decompression site, incorporating a decompression station building. All upstanding gaswork buildings had been removed and the ground levelled. The enclosed area had been altered to accommodate a water pumping station to the south and road improvements to the north, which had necessitated the construction of a retaining wall, both areas encroaching onto former gaswork land.

*Parsons Brincknerhoff Ltd.* Drawing No. "Figure 2", detailing the site plan, historical information, services and exploratory hole locations, states that the northern gas holder was extant until 1953, the southern gas holder until 1947, the main building block until 1965 and the possible retort house until 1956. These dates correlate with the nationalisation of the gas production and supply in 1949 and the inauguration of the North Wales Gas Grid in 1957. If the main building block was demolished in 1965, then the decompression station was constructed between this date and the publication of an aerial photograph of the site from 1974, showing the decompression station and levelled compound.

Prior to commencement of the PRS Replacement works, the layout was essentially the same as the photograph from 1974, except for vegetation overgrowth across portions of the plot.

### 4.0 RESULTS OF THE WATCHING BRIEF

GAT monitored two stages of groundworks:

- excavation and installation of a culvert across main entrance/temporary access road (April 2009);
- excavation of a compound area to the south of the existing decompression station/ excavation of two foundation platforms for control kiosks/supplementary groundworks (June 2009)

### Excavation and installation of a culvert across main entrance/ temporary access road:

The culvert was designed to replace an existing open culvert that ran from the western end of the site to the southern end, starting from the western of the retaining wall (plate 07). The replacement culvert was excavated to a depth between 0.50m and 0.80m (plates 07 and 08), terminating at a large soakaway at the southern end of the site, excavated to a depth of 1.50m (plate 09).

The initial 3.50m length of the culvert excavtion comprised soft made ground with fragmented brick and stone building material infill (plate 07). Two redundant steel pipes

(function unknown) were also identified, at 0.50m and 0.30m below ground level, respectively. This area was located outside of the original gasworks enclosure but within the decompression station plot and it appeared that the ground was disturbed during the construction of the decompression station compound (for reference: the first 5.0m length of the culvert was outside the original gasworks enclosure).

A remnant of the gasworks enclosure wall was still visible during the groundworks, however, to the south of the culvert, extant as a 6.0m long and 0.50m high stub (plate 11), built from irregular shaped stone (unbonded) and engineering brick, partially overgrown (plate 12). This wall had been breached to accommodate the larger decompression station enclosure (plate 12), but was still extant in this truncated form.

The remainder of the culvert excavation contained made ground, including redundant brick and stone building material and imported gravel. The former were interpreted as remnants of the gasworks, but were demolition rubble and not foundation material. No evidence of the gas holders were identified within the confines of the excavated area. The soakaway at the southern end of the culvert route contained infill/levelling material throughout, to the limit of excavtion at 1.50m (plate 09).

The temporary access road was laid over the existing surface using *Terram* and imported hardcore; no excavation was required so GAT did not attend this stage (see plate 16 for an example of the access road *in situ*).

#### Excavation of a compound area to the south of the existing decompression station/ excavation of two foundation platforms for control kiosks/ supplementary groundworks:

The groundworks were concentrated around the existing decompression station unit and the location of the control kiosks (plates 13 to 18). The excavation depth varied between 1.0m and 1.5m and included a large trench parallel to the southern end of the decompression station unit, excavated to identify the existing services and valves (length: c.17.0m) as well as excavations to the immediate west and east of the decompression station unit. The north-facing ends of the control kiosks were also excavated as part of the engineering programme aligned trench was excavated from the decompression station unit to the location of the kiosks (length: c.13.0m).

Truncated brick and stone foundations were identified within the excavated areas surrounding the decompression station unit (plates 13 to 15).

A stub of brick wall was identified south of the unit beneath 0.60m of demolition/levelling material (plate 13). The brick wall stood eight courses high and was of English bond (frogged). A similar course of brickwork was identified *c*.2.0m to the southeast, within the same excavated area (plate 13). This portion was faced with concrete on the northeast facing elevation. The bricks did not match those used for the decompression station and were interpreted as part of the former gasworks. The excavated area was contaminated and could not be safely accessed.

A truncated portion of brick walling/foundation was also identified along the northwestern end of the decompression station during the excavation (plate 14). The brickwork measured 1.0m in height and 1.50m in width and was faced with cement; an iron girder was attached to the cement. This feature was also interpreted as part of the former gasworks. The excavated area was contaminated and could not be safely accessed.

A brick-built wall return was identified *c*.10.0m to the southeast of the decompression station unit within an excavated area (plate 15). The wall stood six courses high (visible) and appeared to be of similar construction to the examples closer to the decompression station. The wall return was also identified as part of the former gasworks, specifically, the corner of one of the structures that formed the series of interlinked buildings in the northern portion of the gasworks (figures 02 to 04).

The kiosk foundations were laid within very shallow excavations within the imported hardcore for the temporary access road (plate 16). Both kiosk foundations had a W-shape in plan and measured 3.1m in length and 3.3m in width. A series of 1.20m deep pipe trenches were excavated within the kiosks (plates 17 and 18). As with the neighbouring culvert excavation, this area contained redundant brick and stone building material used for levelling the site after demolition of the gasworks (plate 18). A concrete pad was identified within the kiosk excavation (plates 17 and 18): this pad was interpreted as a remnant of the decompression station construction phase and/or operation phase and not part of the gasworks.

No structural evidence for the retort house was identified at this location. An examination of the historical map evidence (the First to Third Edition Ordnance Survey 25" maps of the area) suggests the location of the retort house was within or mostly within what is now the pumping station, outside of the decompression station boundary.

# **5.0 CONCLUSION**

The groundworks monitored by GAT during the PRS replacement identified structural remains for the former gasworks at the northern end of the site, surrounding the location of the modern gas decompression station. The structural remains were identified as redundant foundations belonging to the series of interlinked buildings that are evident on the First to Third Edition Ordnance Survey 25" maps of the area. Specific buildings could not be identified either at this stage or during the desk-based assessment. The desk-based assessment did confirm, however, that the retort house was located at the southern end of the gasworks and that this building was located outside the gas decompression station boundary, within the water pumping station plot.

The excavation of the culvert route and the control kiosk foundations identified extensive demolition/levelling deposits at the southern end of the site. No evidence for the southern gas holding tank was identified within the route of the culvert excavation. The demolition/levelling deposits were interpreted as remains of the gasworks.

It was also confirmed that the western end of the gas decompression site was outside the original plot of the gasworks and had truncated the original gasworks access road during its construction. This area was examined during the excavation of the culvert and contained demolition/levelling material. It appeared that the construction of the gas decompression site in this area also used demolition material from the gasworks.

A truncated length of walling belonging to the gasworks was identified at the eastern end of the site. This wall is visible on the First to Third Edition Ordnance Survey 25" maps of the area and functioned as the boundary wall for the works. The wall was extant to a length of 0.60m, between the two current access points. It appeared that the wall was truncated to accommodate the decompression station plot. The wall was not affected by the groundworks monitored by GAT.

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The outline of the decompression station is highlighted in RED

SCALE: NTS



Figure 02: reproduction of Ordnance Survey First Edition 25" Map of Menai Bridge, 1899. The outline of the decompression station is superimposed in RED; note the larger plot outline for the decompression station at the western end of the plot compared to the former gasworks. Note also that the northeastern end of the gasworks are outside the plot. A portion of the gasworks boundary wall was identified at the southwestern corner of the decompression station, extant as a 6.0m long and 0.50m high stub wall (cf. plates 11 & 12). This wall had been breached to accommodate the decompression station. SCALE: 1 to 750@A4



Figure 03: reproduction of Ordnance Survey Second Edition 25" Map of Menai Bridge, 1900. The outline of the decompression station is superimposed in RED SCALE: 1 to 750@A4



Figure 04: reproduction of Ordnance Survey Second Edition 25" Map of Menai Bridge, 1900. The outline of the decompression station is superimposed in RED; note the larger plot outline for the decompression station at the western end of the plot compared to the former gasworks. Note also that the northeastern end of the gasworks are outside the decompression plot. A return wall associated with the gasworks was identified at the eastern end of the decompression station during groundworks. The return may represent the southeastern corner of a building attached to the main building block (cf. plate 15) SCALE: 1 to 750@A4



Figure 05: Location of the PRS replacement area based on client drawing "District Governors MP & LP Outlet: Ref. 006". The outline of the decompression station is highlighted in RED. A return wall associated with the gasworks was identified at the eastern end of the decompression station during groundworks. The return may represent the southeastern corner of a building attached to the main building block (cf. figure 04 & plate 15). A stub of brick wall was identified south of the unit beneath 0.60m of demolition/levelling material (plate 13). The brick wall stood eight courses high and was of English bond (frogged). A similar course of brickwork was identified c.2.0m to the southeast, within the same excavated area (plate 13). This portion was faced with concrete on the northeast facing elevation. The bricks did not match those used for the decompression station and were interpreted as part of the former gasworks. Note: dashed lines equal groundwork areas





Plate 01: view southwest of site prior to PRS replacement works. The former gasworks is located within the centre of the image and the location of the decompression station



Plate 02: view east of proposed location for control kiosks assocaited with the PRS replacement works. No known gaswork structures were identified at this location. The former retort house was located within the fenced area at the right of image, in what is now a pumping station compound.



Plate 03: view northwest of existing decompression station. Former location of the majority of the gaswork structures. The large retaining wall is associated with twentieth century road improvements and was not extant during the operation of the gasworks



Plate 04: view west of existing decompression station. Former location of the majority of the gaswork structures



Plate 05: view northeast of existing decompression station prior to start of the groundworks, detailing former location of the gaswork structures. The large retaining wall is associated with twentieth century road improvements and was not extant during the operation of the gasworks.



Plate 06: view northeast of existing decompression station during initial groundworks, detailing vegetation clearance and topsoil removal.



Plate 07: excavation of culvert trench detailing full depth. The initial 5.0m of the culvert was outside the original gasworks enclosure; the retaining wall was built for the decmpression station. The stratigraphy comprised made ground, including demolition material possibly associated with the former gasworks. (Scale: 1.0m)



Plate 08: view southwest of culvert excavation within former gasworks plot, detailing full excavation depth. Stratigraphy comprised made ground, including imported gravel. Note the slate capped culvert close to the ranging pole; this culvert was blocked by silt. The photograph was taken at the former location of a gas holding tank, suggesting the culvert was laid after the tank was decommissioned (post-1947) (Scale: 1.0m)



Plate 09: soakaway at the southern end of the culvert excavation route, which contained infill/levelling material throughout, to the limit of excavtion at 1.50m



Plate 10: view northwest of culvert excavation route detailing total length and full excavation depth. Former location of gas holding tank in foreground: no evidence for the tank was identiifed within this area to the limit of excavation and the stratigraphy comprised made ground (including imoported gravel). The initial 5.0m of the culvert, leading from the retaining wall, was located outside the former gasworks enclosure (cf. plate 07)



Plate 11: view southwest of redundant boundary wall associated with the former gasworks. The boundary wall appears to have been breached during the construction of the decompression station, post-1965, which extended the original plot of the gasworks. It was unclear whether the wall stood at an original height, due to vegetation overgrowth. (Scale: 1.0m)



Plate 12: view west of redundant boundary wall associated with the former gasworks. The boundary wall appears to have been breached during the construction of the decompression station, post-1965, which extended the original plot of the gasworks. It was unclear whether the wall stood at an original height, due to vegetation overgrowth. The wall measured 6.0m in length and 0.50m in height and was built from irregular shaped stone (unbonded) and engineering brick. (Scale: 1.0m)



Plate 13: view north of exposed section parallel to the decompression station and visible during the groundworks, detailing truncated brick-built foundations interpreted as remnants of the former gasworks. The function of the building could not be determined, but it was identified as part of a series of buildings occupying the northern end of the gasworks plot, visible on the First to Third Edition 25" Ordnance Survey maps of the area (cf. figures 02 to 05) (Scale: 1.0m)



Plate 14: view northeast of exposed section parallel to the decompression station and visible during the groundworks, detailing truncated brick-built foundations interpreted as remnants of the former gasworks; note, a truncated iron "girder" is visible to the right of the ranging pole. The function of the building could not be determined, but it was identified as part of a series of buildings occupying the northern end of the gasworks plot, visible on the First to Third Edition 25" Ordnance Survey maps of the area (cf. figures 02 to 05) (Scale: 1.0m)



Plate 15: view northeast of exposed section parallel to the decompression station and visible during the groundworks, detailing truncated brick-built foundations interpreted as remnants of the former gasworks. The function of the building could not be determined, but it was identified as part of a series of buildings occupying the northern end of the gasworks plot, visible on the First to Third Edition 25" Ordnance Survey maps of the area (cf. figures 02 to 05), possibly the southeastern corner of a gasworks building (Scale: 1.0m)



Plate 16: view east of control kiosk platforms during groundworks. The kiosk platforms were laid atop an imported gravel that sealed this area after the removal of vegetation and topsoil (cf. plates 05 and 06). The "grooves" within each kiosk platform were then excavated to accommodate service pipes



Plate 17: view north of control kiosk platforms during groundworks detailing full excavation depth. The kiosk platforms were laid atop an imported gravel that sealed this area after the removal of vegetation and topsoil (cf. plates 05 and 06). The concrete visible within the excavated area was extant prior to the start of groundworks; the function of the concrete could not be determined as examination of the available map evidence suggests that no gaswork buildings were extant in this area (cf. figures 02 to 04). (Scale: 1.0m)



Plate 18: close-up view of control kiosk groundworks detailing full excavation depth. Note concrete layer which was extant prior to start of groundworks. The function of the concrete could not be determined as examination of the available map evidence suggests that no gaswork buildings were extant in this area (cf. figures 02 to 04), but it may be associated with the construction or operation of the decompression station and/or pumping station. Note the demolition material beneath the concrete layer, interpreted as the remains of the former gasworks, utilised as a levelling deposit.





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