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Engineering Archaeological Services Ltd.

**Antur Stiniog Downhill Cycle Tracks Extension, Blaenau Ffestiniog,
Gwynedd: Archaeological Watching Brief**



**Antur Stiniog Downhill Cycle Tracks
Extension, Blaenau Ffestiniog,
Gwynedd: Archaeological Watching
Brief**

I.P. Brooks

EAS Client report 2019/08

Project Commissioned

by

Adrian Bradley

on behalf of

Antur Stiniog

Fieldwork

by

I.P. Brooks

Engineering Archaeological Services Ltd.

**Antur Stiniog Downhill Cycle Tracks
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registered in England

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Introduction

Grid Reference:

Centred on SH 03330 37157

Location (Figure 1)

The proposed new downhill cycle trails all run from the top of Cribau, approximately 800 m north of the Llechwedd Slate Cavern Visitor Centre, Blaenau Ffestiniog, Gwynedd, down slope above Plas Waenydd Lodge. The Red Routes cross the upper slopes above Ffridd y Bwlch, on the northern side of Cribau, joining the existing Y Du track above the trail or adit to the north west of the remains of Tai'r-frest. The other two routes are on the eastern slopes of Cribau, both finishing near the remains of the Cribau Farmstead. Whilst the Black Route links two of the existing trails, the Green Route takes a wider, less steep route on the eastern flanks of Cribau.

Background

Three new downhill routes at the Antur Stiniog Down Hill Trails, Blaenau Ffestiniog were constructed in August and September 2019. An archaeological assessment of the original development was carried out by Engineering Archaeological Services Ltd and Govannon Consultancy (Brooks *et al* 2009) which included a desktop study, walk over survey of the proposed routes and an interpretation scoping study for four potential trail development including that above Llechwedd Quarry. This was followed by a watching brief on the construction phase of the downhill trail (Brooks 2013). The work associated with the watching brief recorded a number of previously unrecognised archaeological features, largely because the routes that were built bore little correspondence to those delimited in the planning phase. Also, within the construction phase a paleo-environmental study of Ffridd y Bwlch (Grant 2013) recorded the environmental changes from Later Mesolithic (5805 ± 35 BP) to the nineteenth century AD.

An assessment of the current development took place in February 2019 (Brooks 2019) which located a few features along the proposed routes and the report recommended a part-time watching brief be carried out on the construction phase of the development, particularly in the area of the Cribau farmstead. The routes actually constructed differed from those assessed (Figure 2), these re-routes were partly as a response to the archaeological assessment, but were largely for practical construction reasons, avoiding the majority of deep peat deposits or local conditions which made the construction of the proposed route dangerous.

Summary

Only two new archaeological features were located during the watching brief on the construction of the three new routes for the Antur Stiniog Down Hill Trails. One was the remains of a field wall, whilst the other was a peat stack which was associated with the farmstead of Cribau. In addition, five areas with peat development over 0.5 m were located.

Dim ond dwy nodwedd archaeolegol newydd y cafwyd hyd iddyn nhw wrth wyllo tra bod ar tri llwybr newydd yn cael eu hadeiladu ar gyfer Antur Stiniog. Olion hen wal gae oedd un ohonyn nhw, tra bod y llall yn bentwr mawn oedd yn gysylltiedig â ffermdy Cribau. Yn ogystal, cafwyd hyd i bum ardal lle codwyd mawn ers talwm, i ddyfnder o dros 0.5 m.

Methodology

The new tracks were excavated using a back-acting excavator by Xtreme Tracks, unlike the previously constructed tracks these were simple dug down to the first stable layer rather than the surfaced with materials and rock from a series of borrow pits dug along the side of the route. The exception of this pattern was the peat deposits on top of Cribau where slate waste was imported for the running track. Three routes were constructed, a Red Route which crosses the top and western side of Cribau; a Green Route which loop down the eastern side and a Black Route which was dug in two sections and linked two of the previously constructed tracks.

An intermittent watching brief was carried out with the site visited approximately every other day or when areas of archaeological potential were expected to be dug. Features and deposits of archaeological interest were recorded with a written description, drawn record and photographed. The photographs were taken with a Nikon D5300 Digital SLR Camera at a resolution of 24.2 MP with the photographs being taken in RAW (NEF) format. These photographs were converted into JPEG format for use as illustration in this report and TIFF for archiving. All features were located using a Garmin GPSmap 62s hand held GPS unit using the WAAS/EGNOS correction setting giving an accuracy of approximately 4 m.

Results (Figure 3)

Red Route

The Red Route crossed the top of Cribau before crossing the western flank of the hill to join the existing Y Du at SH 69870 47515. The route taken is slightly different to that assessed in February (Brooks 2019), partly because the route down the steep section of the hillside require a safer route. However, the southern end of the route was redesigned so that it joined the existing black route above the wall (PRN 76086) and crossed this feature at the same point as the existing route thereby reducing the potential damage to the archaeology in this area.

No new archaeological features or deposits were recorded along the Red Route, however, there is a deposit of peat, up to 500 mm deep between SH 70188 47936 and SH 70166 47902 on the top of Cribau (Plate 1). This covers approximately 40m of the route near to its start on the top of the hill and forms part of a much larger peat deposit recorded in the original watching brief (Brooks 2013).

Black Route

The new Black Route consists of two sections which links two section of the existing “Powdwr Du” route and the lower end of the “Drafft” route. The upper section runs from SH 70131 47757 to SH 70163 47563 and the lower section between SH 70126 47539 and SH 70122 47410. The re-route between the planning and construction phases was partly to move the route away from an open shaft record in the walk-over survey (PRN 30200, Brooks 2019, 3) and partly for ease of construction moving the route away from potentially deep peat deposits.

Even with the re-routes the new Black Route cut through two peat deposits greater than 0.5 m deep. Between SH 70094 47684 and SH 70069 47667 (Plate 2) was a deposit covering approximately 31 m of the Black Route. This deposit tended to be deeper on the uphill side of the track and was thicker at its north eastern end where the peat deposit rested on a rock exposure. A second peat deposit was located between SH 70080 47617 and SH 70086 47621, an 8 m long section of the route.

Only one new archaeological feature was located on the Black Route. The re-route away from the shaft (PRN 30200) forced the constructed route through a gap between a natural rock face (Plate 4) and one of the drainage ditches (PR 302256, Plate 5) feeding water down to the Cribau farm complex. Linking these two features was the remains of a stone wall (Plate 6). This wall centred on SH 70130

47439 and ran for approximately 6 m. It consisted of a series of earth-fast rocks with the wall only surviving at ground level. It was possible to preserve this feature by burying it beneath the spoil from the construction of the route.

Green Route

The new Green Route diverted from the existing “Drafft” at SH 70438 48055 before re-joining it at SH 70340 47610 before diverging from the “Drafft” again after approximately 79 m at SH 70290 47551. It ended by joining in to “Jumpar” route at SH 70081 47320. The northern section of this new route had been radically re-organised from that assessed in the pre-construction phase of assessment, running further west for much of its length. This re-route avoided extensive soft ground and probable peat deposits. It also avoided large area of probable peat cutting (PRN 14748, Brooks 2019, 3).

Even so it was not possible to avoid all of the peat deposits along the route. A peat filled channel, crossed the route at SH 70457 48072. This was approximately 4.5 m wide and contained up to 1.2 m of peat deposits. It was one of a series of peat filled channels draining the northern plateau of Cribau. More extensive peat deposits were encountered between SH 70433 47898 and SH 70438 47850 (Plate 8) a distance of approximately 75 m. This deposit was the western edge of a more extensive deposit with the constructed route skirting around its edge. A further channel fill with peat was also recorded at SH 70435 47818 which was associated with an active stream which crossed the route at this point.

Two potential archaeological features were encountered along the route of the Green Route. Between SH 70535 48063 and SH 70514 48028, a distance of approximately 40 m, there was a shelf cut into the slope (Plate 9). This was approximately 3 m wide and was cut into the hillside by approximately 0.4 m along its upper (western) edge. The initial impression was that this was a farm track, looping around the eastern knoll of Cribau. Whilst this interpretation may still be valid, no metaling or other hardening of the possible track surface was recorded when the Green route was constructed along this platform.

On the edge of the Cribau Farmstead complex at SH 70107 47339 was a linear mound running NE – SW, 1.5 m wide and 4 m long. When sectioned (Figure 4, Plate 10), the mound had a layer of topsoil (Context 1) composed largely of degraded peat. Below this was a stack of peat (Context 2), partly in the form of cut peat “bricks (Plate 11) forming a stack 0.5 m high. Although slightly degraded it was possible to determine the structure within this mound with a central, level stack against which further blocks were rested at an angle of approximately 45°. Each of the bricks were approximately These “bricks” were up to 230 mm long, 60 mm wide and 100 mm thick. The “bricks” rested on a platform of slate slabs 30 mm thick (Context 3). These slabs, in turn, sat on a layer of rough gravel (Context 4) consisting of sub-angular stones up to 130 mm in size. It is assumed that this gravel layer and the slate slabs acts as a firm, dry base for the peat stack which was used as a fuel supply for the farmstead of Cribau.

Discussion

The construction of the new routes on the Antur Stiniog Down Hill Trails appears to have resulted in minimal damage to the archaeological record with only two new archaeological features being recorded. Both of these relate to the post-medieval, probably nineteenth and early twentieth century, agricultural practice associated with Cribau farmstead. The remains of a stone wall show a boundary made up of both natural and man-made features forming an outer set of enclosures beyond the upstanding wall (PRN 30203) which appear to be the extent of actively managed land.

The other feature is a peat stack, presumably the supply of fuel for the farmstead of Cribau. The turves within this mound had been carefully stacked and then covered by a layer of soil, presumably to keep the turves dry.

It is clear that there are considerable peat deposits on the flanks of Cribau. The current project defined the position of five areas where this peat is at least 0.5 m thick, however the flexibility in the routing of the tracks during construction allowed further, probably more extensive and deeper deposits, to be avoided. The importance of these deposits is with the environmental and archaeological history they contain. Previous work (Grant 2013), undertaken in the initial construction phase of the downhill tracks, demonstrated the potential for long, detailed records to be defined based on the survival of pollen and other organic microfossils. Grant's previous work showed a detailed paleoenvironmental record stretching back to 4728 – 4548 cal BC (Suerc-39682 (GU26939)) and there is no reason why the deposits on the eastern flanks of Cribau should not contain a similar detailed record.

Acknowledgments

The project was commissioned by Adrian Bradley on behalf of Antur Stiniog. Thanks, are also due to Mei Black and his team at Extreme Tracks for their care and consideration during the construction phase of the project. The project was monitored by Jenney Emmett for the Gwynedd Archaeological Planning Service.

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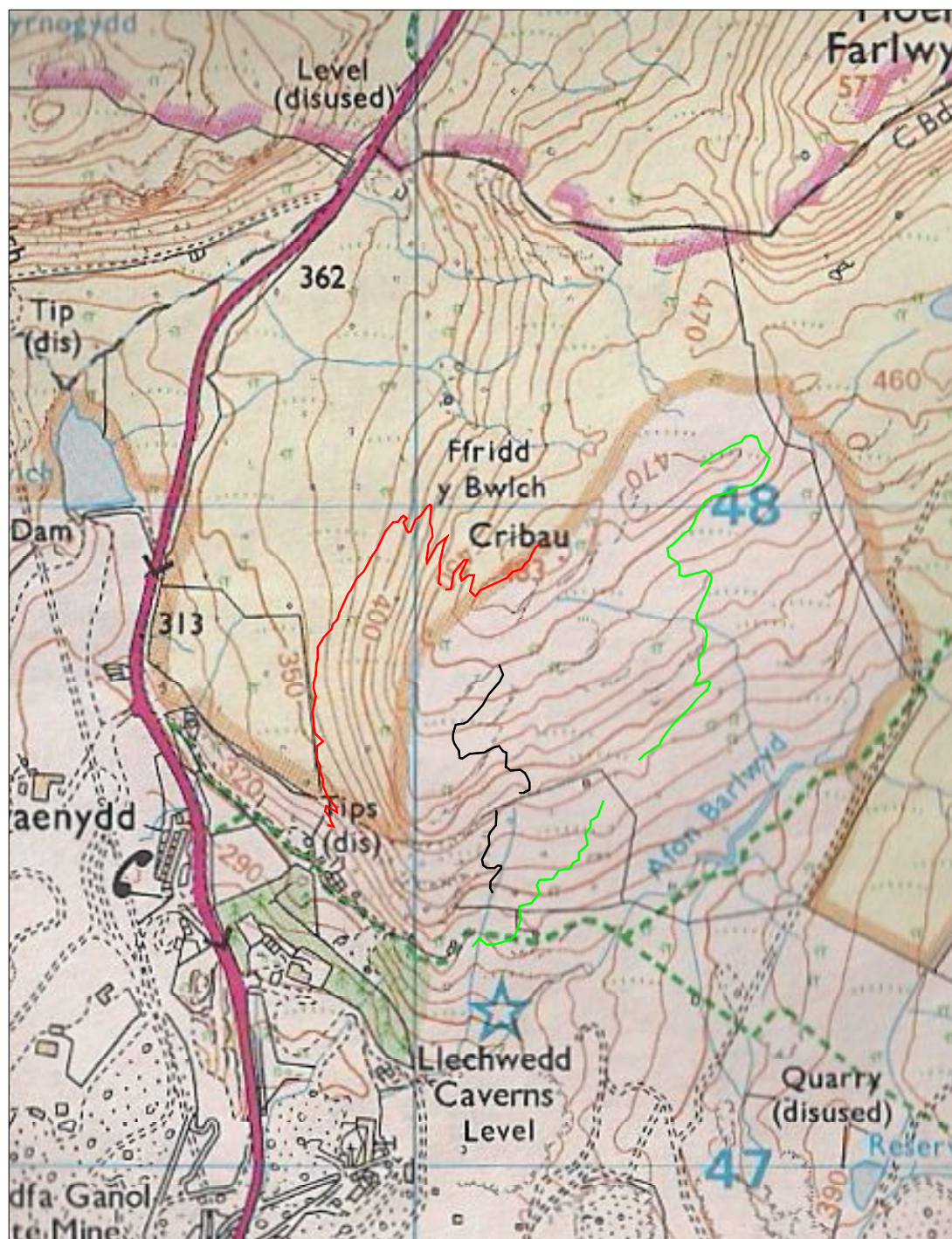


Figure 1: Location
Re-scaled to 1:10,000

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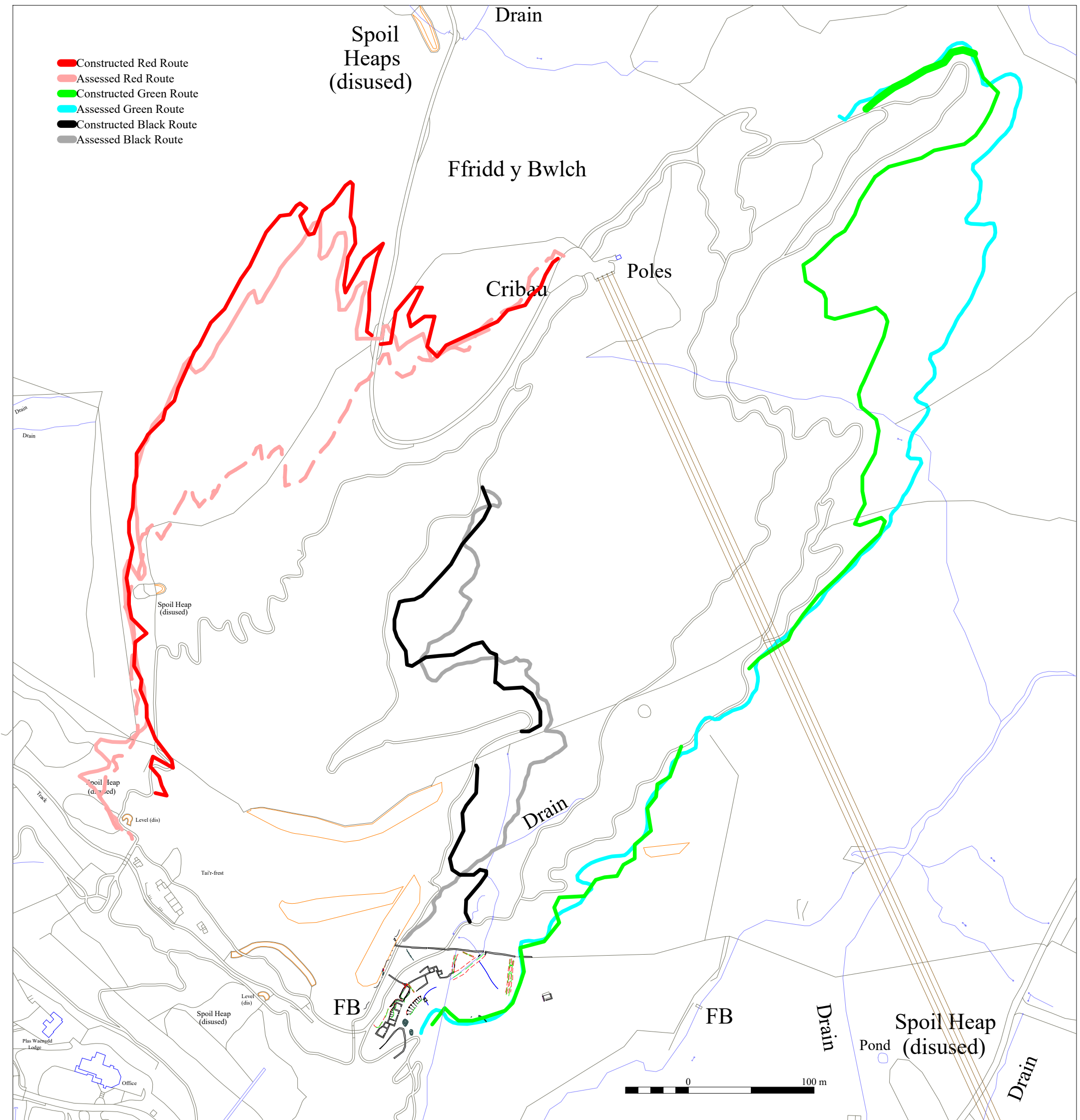


Figure 2: Comparison between the Planned and Constructed Routes
Scale 1:3000

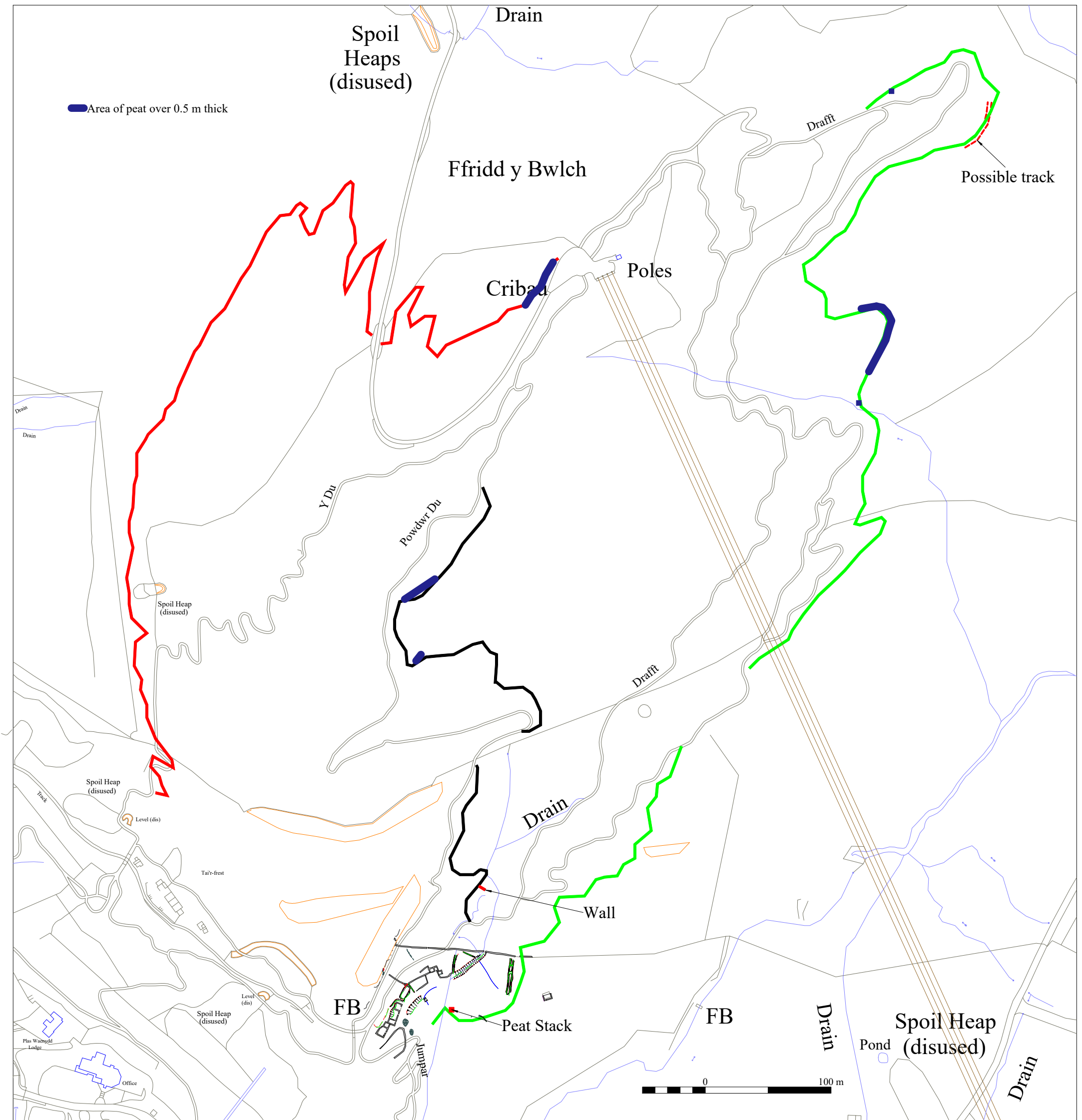


Figure 3: Results
Scale 1:3,000

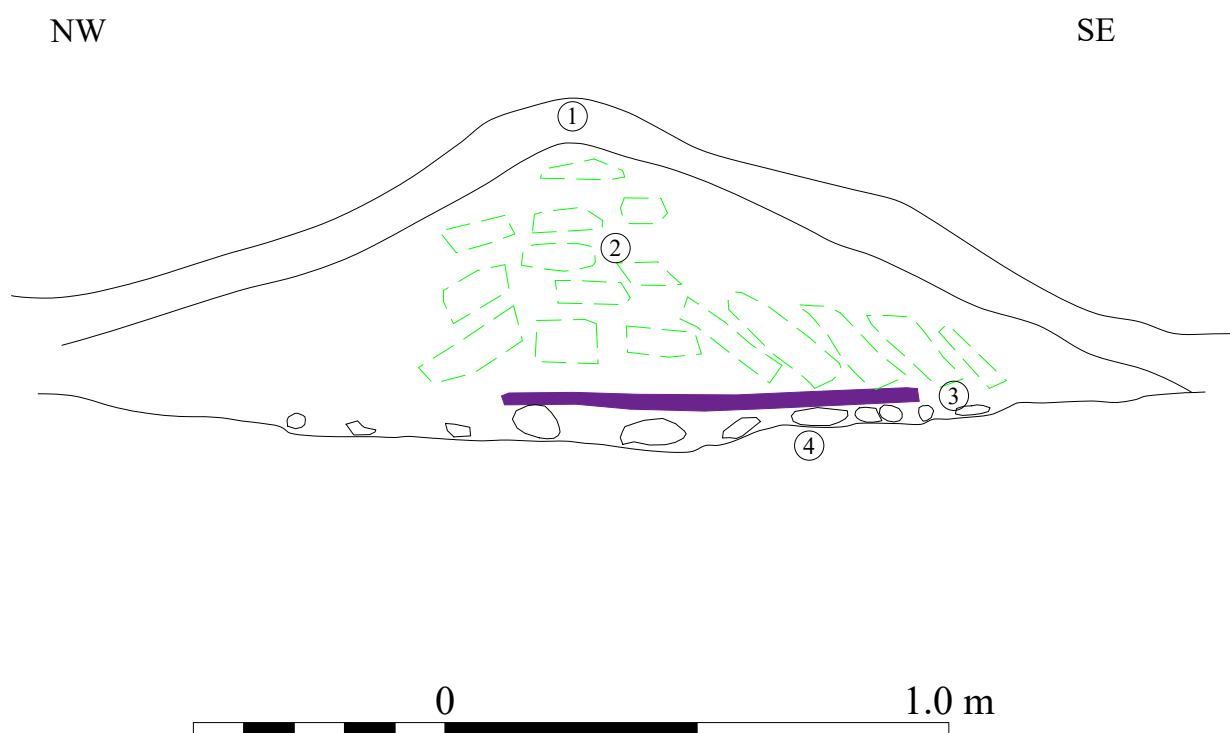


Figure 4: Section through the Peat Stack
Scale 1:15



Plate 1: Peat deposits between SH 70188 47936 and SH 70166 47902 on the Red Route



Plate 2: Peat Deposit between SH 70094 47684 and SH 70069 47667 on the Black Route



Plate 3: Peat deposits between SH 70080 47617 and SH 70086 47621 on the Black Route



Plate 4: Rock face at one end of the wall crossing the Black Route



Plate 5: Ditch with revetting wall (PRN30225) at one end of the wall crossing the Black Route



Plate 6: Remains of wall crossing the Black Route



Plate 7: Peat filled channel centred on SH 70457 48072 on the Green Route



Plate 8: Peat deposit between SH 70433 47898 and SH 70438 47850 on the Green Route



Plate 9: Possible trackway on the Green Route



Plate 10: Peat stack on the Green Route



Plate 11: Peat block