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Tomen y Mur:  
**Trawsfynydd, Gwynedd**

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**Archaeological Survey and Record**

GAT Project No. 2190

Report No. 949

May, 2011



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# **Tomen y Mur, medieval motte**

## Archaeological survey and record

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Report No. 949

Prepared for  
the Snowdonia National Park Authority

May 2011

By  
Richard Cooke



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# Tomen y Mur, medieval motte

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## **TOMEN Y MUR, MEDIEVAL MOTTE (G2190)**

### **Archaeological survey and record**

#### ***Summary***

*Gwynedd Archaeological Trust carried out an archaeological survey and record of an eroding section of the medieval motte called Castell Tomen y Mur, situated within the Roman fort of Tomen y Mur SH 705 386. The motte lies within a large scheduled area (Me 002) which includes the motte, Roman fort and adjacent features. The work was carried out in advance of repair work to the erosion scars, and showed that the core of the motte was constructed from clay and stone, almost certainly robbed from the Roman fort. A large post-hole was discovered in the eroded section of the largest scar, which may have been part of a palisade or defended enclosure.*

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Gwynedd Archaeological Trust (GAT) was asked by Andre Berry on behalf of the Snowdonia National Park Authority (SNPA) to carry out an archaeological survey and record of two erosion scars on the medieval motte, in advance of repair work to the eroded sections. The first erosion scar was located on the southern face of the motte, where a large section had been eroded away by adverse weather, aggravated by sheltering livestock. Further damage had occurred by visitors to the site pulling loose stones from the scar in the search for artefacts.

The second erosion scar was located on the southeast facing slope and was much less severe and significantly smaller than the first.

### **2. SPECIFICATION AND PROJECT DESIGN**

A detailed brief was not received for this work. Although a specific project design was not produced, the work has been carried out according to the standards set out in the Institute of Field Archaeologists (IFA) *Standard and Guidance for an archaeological watching brief* (2001). Furthermore, the report should be read in conjunction with the scheme specific project design produced by GAT dated April 2011.

### **3. METHODS AND TECHNIQUES**

Gwynedd Archaeological Trust undertook the archaeological survey and record on the 9<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> May 2011. A photographic record was taken of both erosion scars prior to any work being carried out, and then they were both cleaned using hand tools and a second photographic record taken. Profiles were drawn across both erosion scars, and an elevation section was drawn of the largest scar showing the construction of the motte and a large post-hole revealed in the section of the scar. The scars and drawing lines were then surveyed using a Geodimeter Pro robotic total station with Itronix datalogger, and amalgamated with an earlier survey carried out by Engineering Archaeological Services Ltd for the SNPA.

#### 4. ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

Tomen-y-mur is a Roman auxiliary fort with two obvious phases. The earlier fort had earth and timber defences and enclosed 2.03 ha. This was reduced in size; with a stone rampart to 1.56 ha (Gresham 1938, Jarrett 1969 and Crew 2008). A Norman motte overlies the north-western gate of the reduced fort. The remains of farm buildings, incorporating distinctive square blocks of Roman masonry overlie the outer defences of the north-eastern side of the fort. Several, largely undocumented, excavations were carried out in the fort and its environs in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A trench sectioning both phases of the north-west ramparts was excavated in 1962 (Jarrett 1969). This revealed that the first fort was defended by a double ditch with a counterscarp bank. This was replaced by a single ditch immediately in front of the rampart. The fort was then reduced by the construction of a new rampart and v-shaped ditch about half way across the *retentura*. It is probable that the fort was a Flavian foundation and the reduction is dated by is dated by Trajanic samian. Abandonment by c.130 seems probable (Webster 2005). The fort is surrounded by a group of extramural features visible as earthworks. A possible annexe and 2 small practice camps are visible in improved land to the north-west. A small bath house and a 3-room structure, probably a *mansio*, can be seen beside the road immediately to the south-east of the fort. A leat provided water for these structures. Between the bath house and the fort is a 40m by 25m rectangular platform, defined by a low bank and a rush-filled interior. Crew (2008) suggests that this may be a post-Roman hall, perhaps to be linked with the Mabinogion story of Math fab Mathonwy. It appears to overlie the Roman road but the area has been disturbed by recent drainage and the relationship could only be proved by excavation. The road runs to a large earthen bridge abutment. Barrows and marching camps lie alongside the road in fields to the south-east of the fort. A possible parade ground, small amphitheatre and further barrow lie to the north and north-east of the fort.

#### 5. RESULTS OF THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY AND RECORD

##### Introduction

Deposits revealed within both erosion scars are described below and the results are summarised and conclusions discussed, the eroded areas are located on figure 5.

##### Results

The first erosion scar was located on the south slope of the motte near the summit. The scar measured 10.60m in length, an average of 0.60m in depth, and approximately 0.50m in width. The eroded area had formed at a right angle, orientated southwest to northeast and then northwest to southeast. The erosion processes had caused an overhang to develop towards the centre of the scar measuring some 0.36m in width. Once the area had been cleaned it became clear that the core of the motte was constructed from a very firm, yellow clay (002) with frequent large, angular stone inclusions. This deposit constituted the main bulk of the motte, with a layer of moderately soft, dark-brown silt-clay topsoil (003) covering the core, upon which a layer of turf was established. Almost certainly the stone included within the core would have been robbed from the Roman fort, and the topsoil deposit was most likely a deliberate deposition to pin the clay core in place.

Upon cleaning of the southwest facing eroded section, a large feature, probably a post-hole (004), was discovered. It measured 0.80m in width and 0.55m of its depth had been revealed by the erosion. The exact depth and length of the feature was not discernable due to the limits of the erosion scar, however, the feature appeared to cut into the clay and stone core (002) of the motte and was filled by the topsoil layer (003). Upon further investigation, it became clear that the large angular stones to the immediate southeast of the feature and included within the clay and stone core (002), were in fact running over the post-hole, meaning that it had not been cut into the core per se, but rather incorporated into the motte during the deposition of

the core. The fill of the post-hole was identical to the topsoil layer (003) with no obvious inclusion of post packing or post removal. Thus it can be surmised that either the post had rotten in-situ and thus the post-hole (004) became filled with the layer immediately above it, topsoil (003), or that the post-hole was filled and packed with the same topsoil layer as was deposited over the motte core (002). The incorporation of the post-hole (004) into the motte core (002) suggests that whatever the post-hole was utilised for, its purpose was integral to the motte construction and was envisioned as a single construction event. In short, the majority of the motte was constructed, a large post was put in place almost at the summit of the mound, and then more clay and stone material was added to secure the post in place and complete the motte. The location on the summit edge of the motte and the large size of the post-hole suggests that it may be part of a wooden defence wall, possibly a palisade encircling the summit of the motte.

Upon inspection of the southwest facing eroded section, three stepped features were seen 'cut' into the top of the clay core (002). The features were filled with a dark brown silt-clay, identical to the topsoil layer (003) immediately above and most likely the same deposit. It is not clear whether these features are stone-holes, created as stones have fallen out of the eroded section, or whether they are actually part of a stepped profile to the motte, which can be seen faintly on all of its slopes. Indeed, if the features do represent a deliberate stepped profile, it appears that this was created during the deposition of the clay and stone core (002) material, with the topsoil layer (003) consequently being laid over it.

The second erosion scar (005) was located on the southeast facing slope, again close to the summit of the motte. The eroded area was much smaller than the first, measuring 1.30m in length, a maximum of 0.50m in depth, and 0.40m in width. Like the first eroded area, this scar had a clear overhang measuring some 0.20m in width and was linear in plan, orientated northeast to southwest. Once cleaning of the scar was complete, it became clear that the same arrangement of clay and stone core (002) covered with topsoil (003) had been used on this part of the motte. No archaeological features were observed within the cleaned section.

### **Summary**

The cleaning of the two erosion scars has shown that the motte was primarily constructed from a clay and stone core, most probably robbed from the Roman fort. This material undoubtedly had the benefit of being a very firm material which was easily shaped, and readily available. The core may have a stepped profile, most likely due to the construction method of laying layers of smaller dimension upon each other to create a stepped mound. The core would then have been covered with a layer of topsoil to help reduce erosion, but also to create a smooth profile to the mound. Indeed, this method of motte construction is depicted on the Bayeux tapestry.

The large post-hole feature may represent part of a defended enclosure or palisade encircling the summit of the motte. The post-hole was incorporated into the motte rather than having been cut into it, suggesting that the post was put in place while the core of the motte was being deposited.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

The archaeological survey and record of the erosion scars on the medieval motte allowed the depth and nature of deposits constituting the mound to be inspected. Moreover, the discovery of a possible post-hole and stepped profile has raised some possibilities to the form and construction of the original fort.

## 7. THE ARCHIVE

The archive consists of notes, five context sheets and 42 digital images taken using a Nikon D3100 DSLR. The paper archive will be held by Gwynedd Archaeological Trust (project code G2190), and the digital photographs will be curated by the National Monument Record (NMR), Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historic Monuments of Wales, Aberystwyth. Copies of the bound report will be sent to the SNPA Development Control archaeologist, to the Historic Environment Record (HER) Archaeologist at the curatorial division of Gwynedd Archaeological Trust, Bangor, for deposition in the Regional HER, and to the NMR after approval by the client.

## 8. SOURCES

### *Unpublished reports*

Engineering Archaeological Services Ltd survey of Tomen y Mur

GAT project design T0119, *Castell Tomen y Mur, Trawsfynydd*

GAT report 768, *Geophysical survey at Tomen y Mur Roman fort*. 2008

### *Published reports*

Crew P., Davies J.L. and Musson C. 1989. Tomen y Mur, *Archaeology in Wales* 29, 53

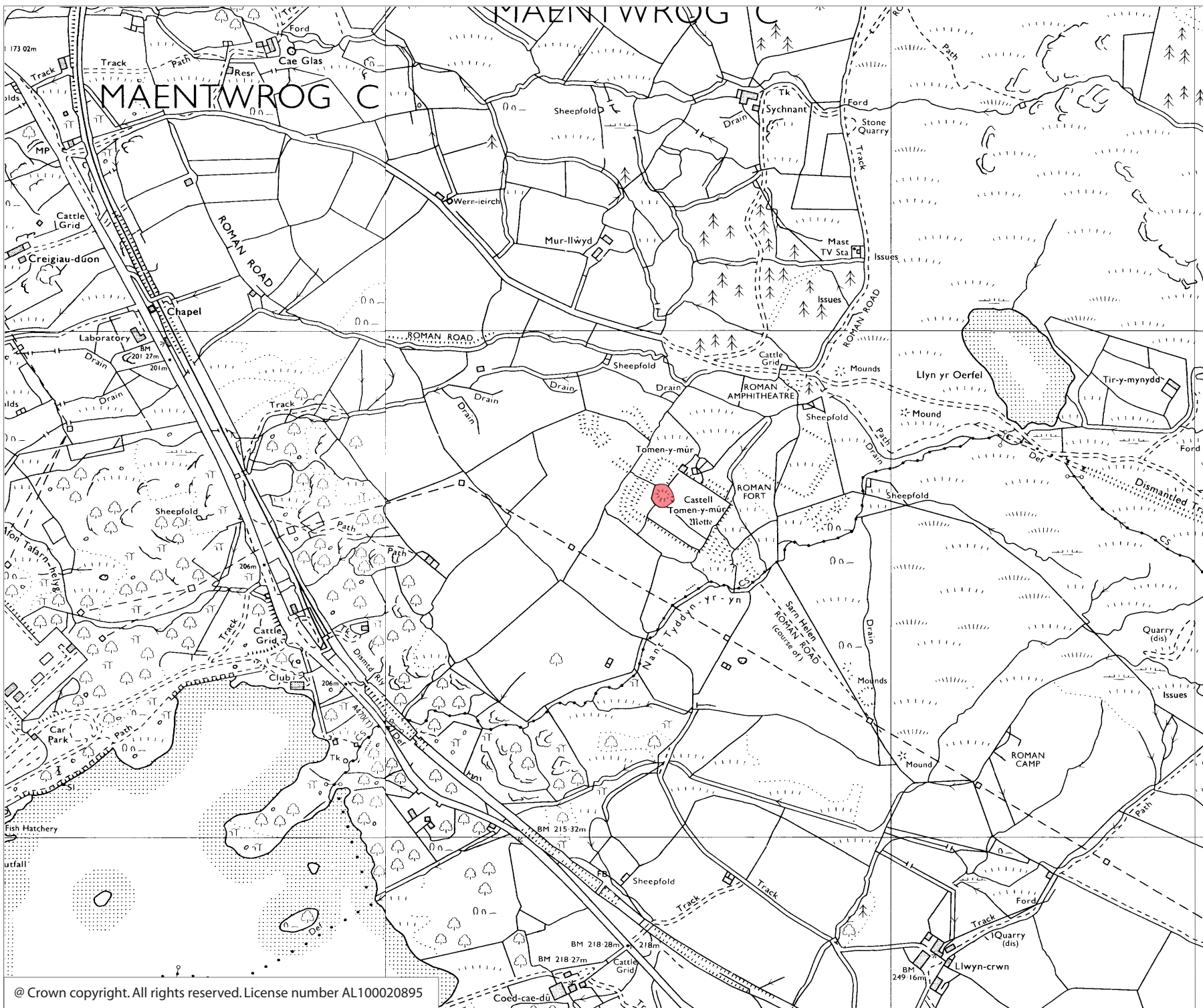
Crew P. 2008, Tomen-y-mur, draft entry for *The Roman Frontier in Wales* Davies, J.L and Burnham B. C. (editors) forthcoming

Gresham C.A., 1938 The Roman fort at Tomen-y-Mur, *Archaeologia Cambrensis*, 93, 192-211.

Jarrett M.G., 1962 Excavations at Tomen-y-Mur 1962, *Journal of the Merioneth Historical and Record Society*, 4, pt.2, 171-2.

Nash-Williams V.E ed. Jarrett M.G. 1969. *The Roman Frontier in Wales*

Thank you is given to Ian Brooks of Engineering Archaeological Services Ltd for providing survey data of Castell Tomen y Mur.



● Site location



Craig Beuno, Ffordd y Garth, Bangor, Gwynedd, LL57 2RT  
 Ffôn: 01248 352535 • Ffacs: 01248 370925 • e-mail: gaj@hench.co.uk

**Figure 1: Location of Tomen y Mor medieval motte 1:10,000 at A4.**



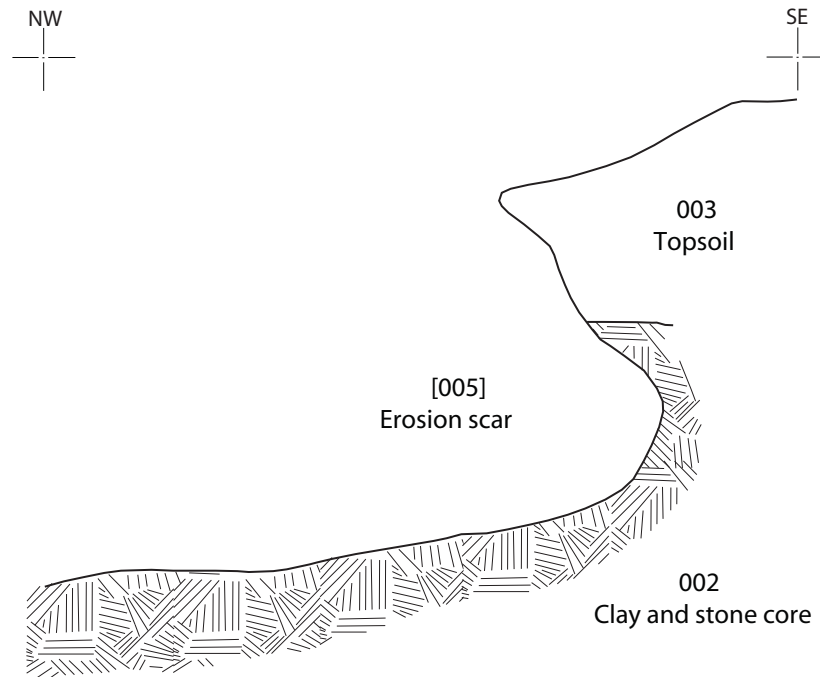
003  
Topsoil

[001]  
Erosion scar

002  
Clay and stone core

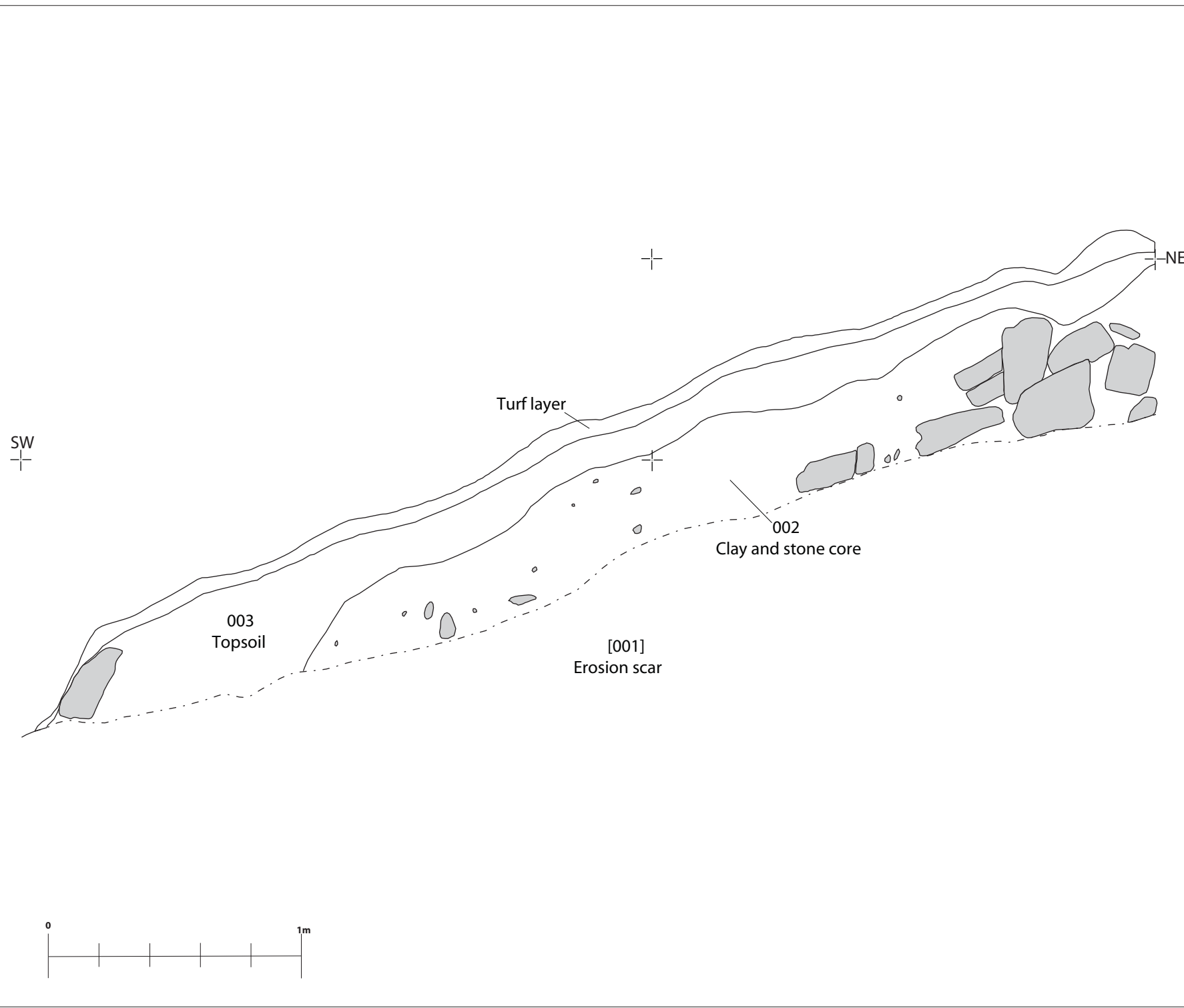


Located on figure 7



Located on figure 7

**Figure 3: Profile through erosion scar [005]**



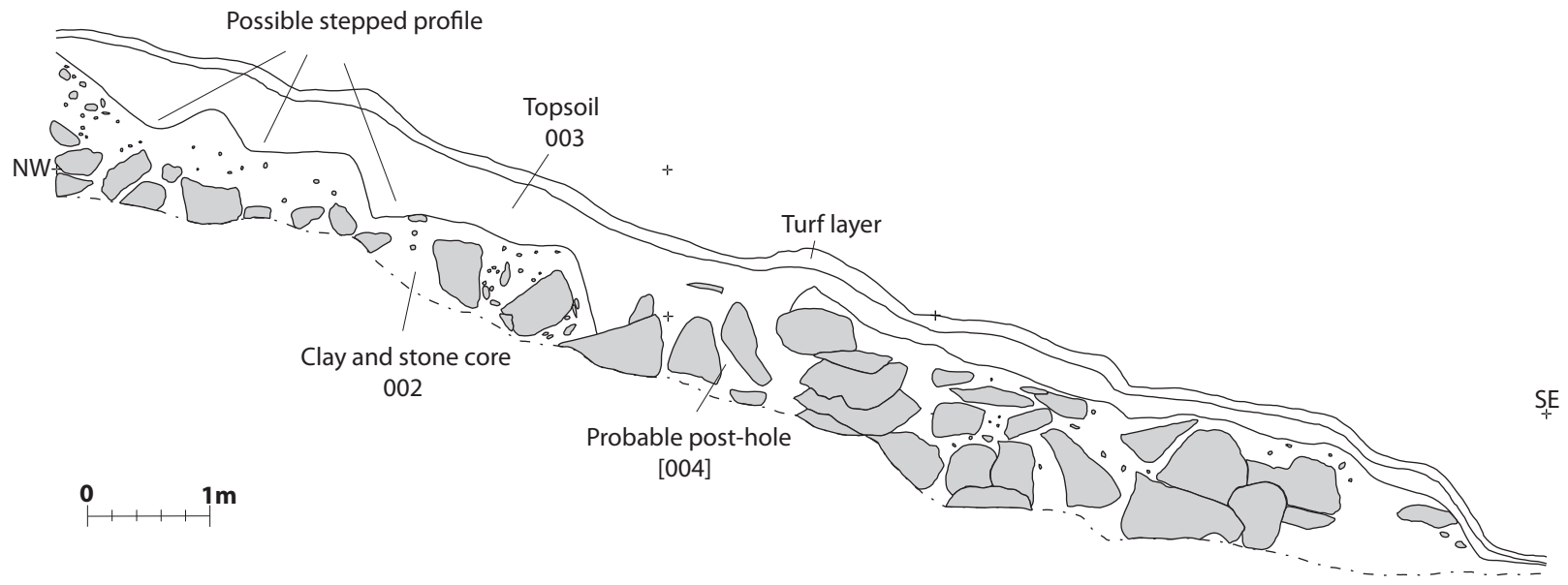
Located on figure 7



Craig Beuno, Ffordd y Garth, Bangor, Gwynedd, LL57 2RT  
 Ffôn: 01248 352335 Ffacs: 01248 370925 e-mail: gal@gmhwb.co.uk

**Figure 4: Southeast elevation of erosion scar [005]**



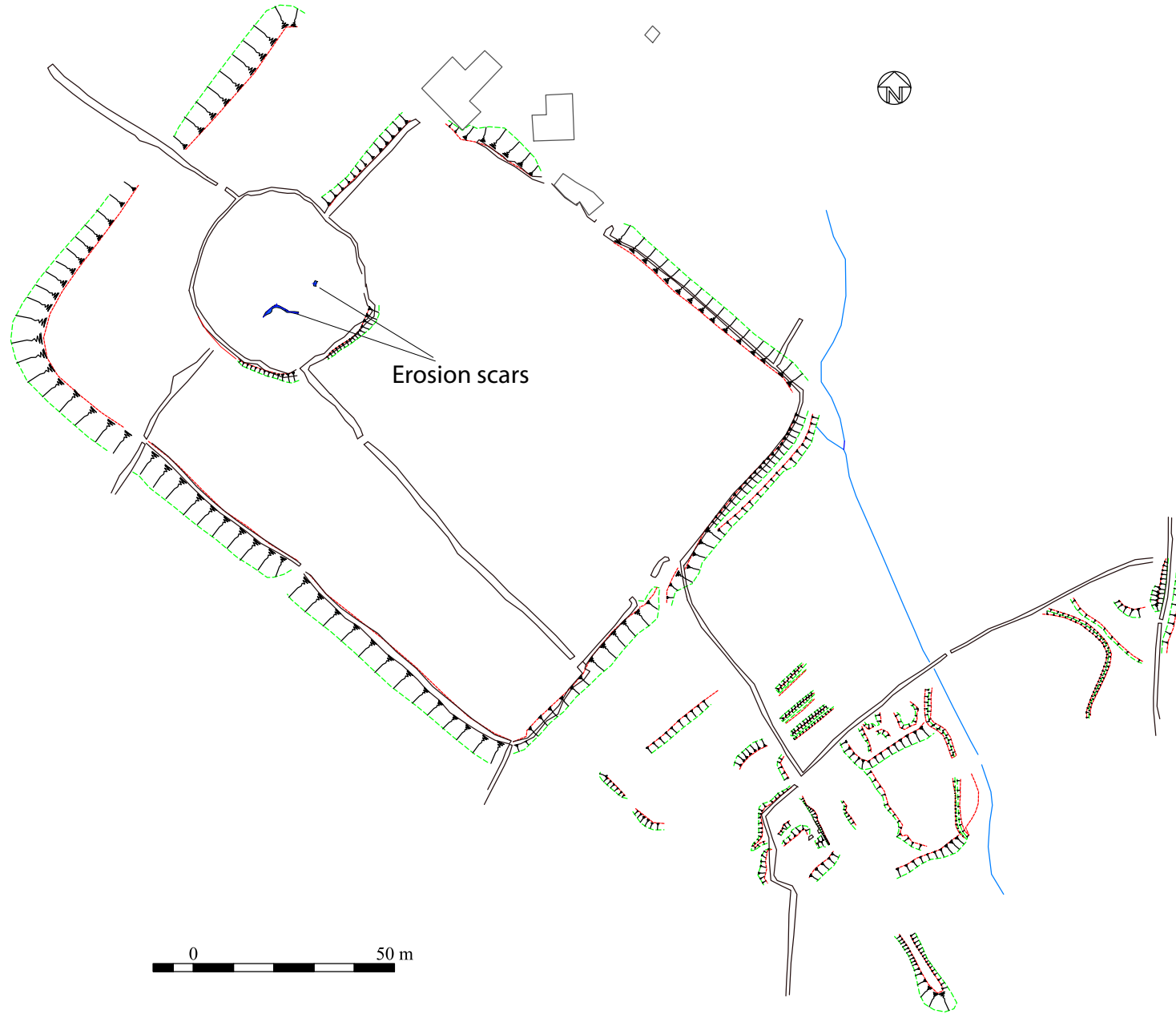


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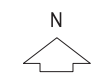
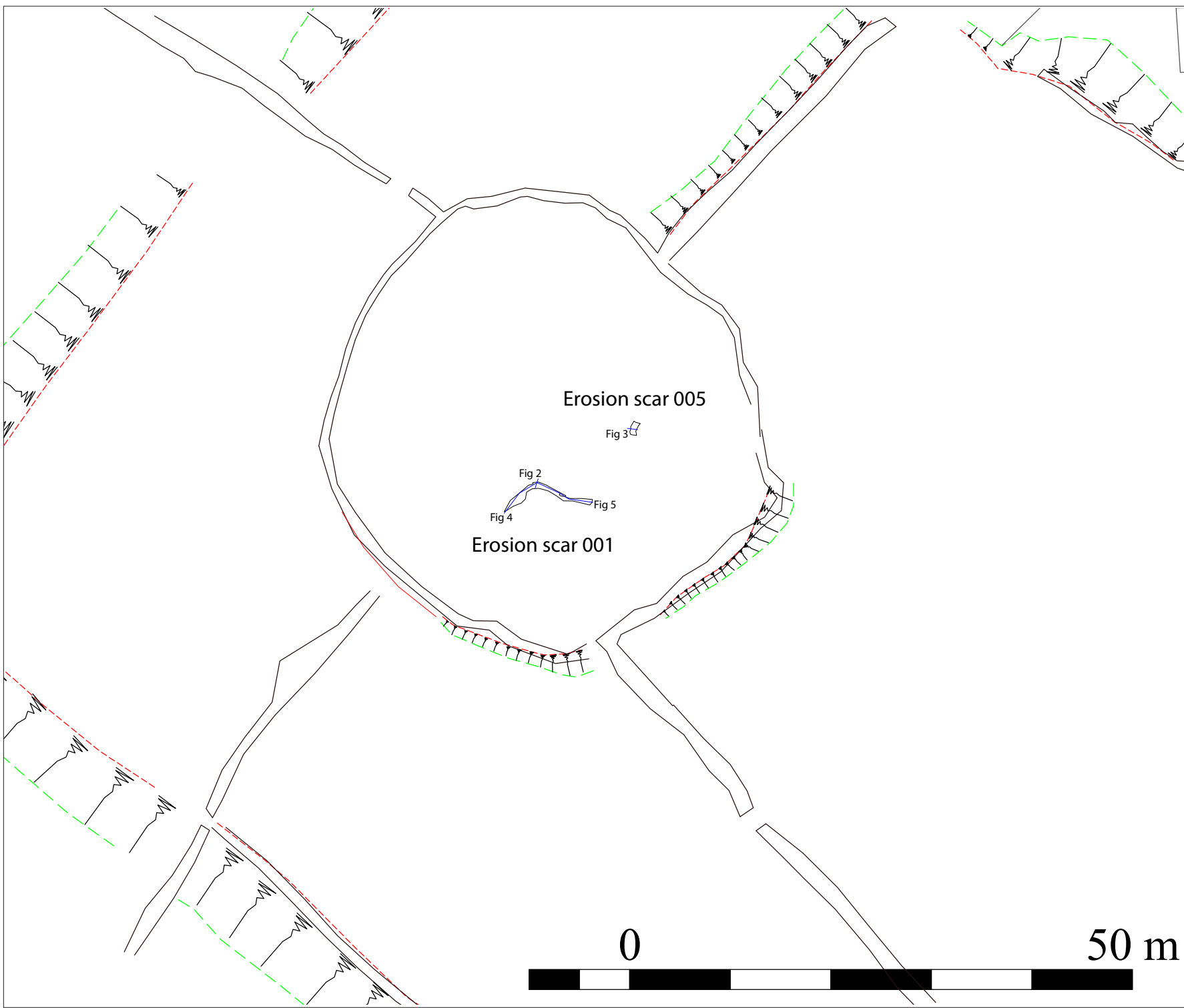


Craig Beuno, Ffordd y Garth, Bangor, Gwynedd, LL57 2RT  
 Ffôn: 01248 352335 Ffacs: 01248 370925 email: gait@berch.co.uk

**Figure 5: Southwest elevation of erosion scar [005] 1:30 at A4**



**Figure 6: Location of erosion scars at Tomen y Mur motte**



**Figure 7: Location of erosion scars and elevation drawings**



Plate 1: Erosion scar [001] from the south



Plate 2: Probable post-hole [004] in erosion scar [001] from the southwest





Plate 3: Erosion scar [001] from the west



Plate 4: Erosion scar [005] from the southeast



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Craig Beuno, Ffordd y Garth, Bangor, Gwynedd. LL57 2RT  
Ffon: 01248 352535. Ffacs: 01248 370925. email: [gat@heneb.co.uk](mailto:gat@heneb.co.uk)