

CPAT Report No 1106

Hen Caerwys Community Excavation, Caerwys, Flintshire



THE CLWYD-POWYS ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

CPAT Report No 1106

Hen Caerwys Community Excavation, Caerwys, Flintshire

by
Bob Silvester and Will Davies

August 2011

Report for Cadw



CPAT

The Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust

41 Broad Street, Welshpool, Powys, SY21 7RR

tel (01938) 553670, fax (01938) 552179

© CPAT 2011

The Background

The medieval settlement at Hen Caerwys is said to have been found, or more accurately reported, by Wilfred Hemp, the Secretary of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales. In consultation with the eminent local historian, Ellis Davies, the site was attributed the name Hen Caerwys, implying that they felt it might be the predecessor of the medieval planned town which lies little more than one kilometre to the south-west. Less certain is the date at which the remains were first identified, though 1960 has been mooted. Wilfred Hemp's archive could provide clues, but this remains largely uncatalogued in Aberystwyth. Hemp retired from the Royal Commission in 1946 and while it is conceivable that he still assessed new discoveries in his mid-60s and 70s, it seems probable that Hen Caerwys first came to his attention prior to his retirement.

It was in 1962 that two of the leading lights in the Flintshire Historical Society, T. T. Pennant Williams and M Bevan-Evans, started to excavate one of the house platforms at Hen Caerwys, and the work was continued by G. B. Leach and Pennant Williams in the following years. It appears that excavations continued, though intermittently rather than in more conventional excavation seasons, until 1968 or perhaps even 1969, and that having completed the excavation of one house and its adjacent ancillary building, they moved on to another house platform nearby. Leach and Pennant Williams never published the results of their excavations – and indeed their brief notes in various journals became shorter as the years passed – and it was left to T Rogers, who does seem to have been personally involved in the excavations, to publish House 1 in 1979. He had access to some plans and perhaps other records, as well as some of the finds, but virtually none of these are now available; the wording of Rogers' publication matches almost precisely that in a recently encountered, archived typescript that had been prepared at the time of the excavations, probably by Leach. It is quite possible that Rogers also did some digging on his own account at Hen Caerwys, almost certainly in the 1970s, but there are no records, specifically of his work, so this remains no more than an assumption on our part.

Cadw scheduled much of the complex in 1979 and extended the protected area in 1980, coinciding with abortive plans by Rogers to survey and excavate the site on a large scale. Thereafter Rogers' interest appears to have waned and Hen Caerwys was to remain overgrown and poorly understood for another fifteen years. Early attempts at a measured survey by a Mr and Mrs Hill of Caerwys and the Cadw Field Monument Warden Lorna Ackroyd Bell (in the early 1980s and 1990s respectively) correctly identified the key elements of the site, including a large rectangular enclosure and two sets of house platforms, but accurate survey was ultimately hindered by the dense woodland covering much of the site.

This was rectified in 1993 when Cadw grant-aided the Clwyd Archaeology Service to prepare a plan and report of the site as one element of an ongoing management plan, and this was undertaken as an EDM survey on the latter's behalf by the Gwynedd Archaeological Trust. This was made technically possible by extensive clearance works carried out by the landowner, Mr Mike Owens, as part of the management agreement, which also entailed the creation of permissive paths through the woodland, passing the main archaeological features. Some of the results were published in small A4 format in an undated but *c.1994 Historic Landscape Supplement*

to the *Clwyd Archaeology Service Newsletter*, and were also used for an information panel and self-guided walk leaflet prepared by Cadw for the site.

Clwyd County Council along with its archaeology service was disbanded in 1996, and not all of its accumulated archives survived the move to the four new unitary authorities that were created at that time. The large-scale plans generated by the 1993 EDM survey, not only of Hen Caerwys but also of other similar complexes in the vicinity were thought to have been lost, but have, remarkably, come to the light in the last few months. These include plans of the scheduled sites of Pant and Trefraith along with some other fragments of field systems, helping to place Hen Caerwys into context as one element of a complex and extensive relict landscape.

The management agreement has continued with considerable success, selective tree thinning and bi-annual strimming of the lower-lying scrub maintaining Hen Caerwys as a visible and accessible monument, the walks much used by the local community. Most recently, in 2011, Mr Owens, commissioned a geophysical survey of two of the enclosures on the site.

It is against this background of a site which when first excavated in the 1960s was lauded as the first known nucleated medieval settlement in north-east Wales, yet where the records (and finds) seem particularly prone to disappearance and loss, that Cadw and specifically their regional inspector, Will Davies, decided to run a small community excavation during the 2011 Festival of British Archaeology, to re-focus attention on this important site.

The Site

It is not proposed to describe in any detail here the complex of earthworks that make up Hen Caerwys. It has been considered very briefly in Cadw's 2007 leaflet and is alluded to by the writer in the more academic *Lost Farmsteads* volume (ed K Roberts, 2006). There is too a belief that a descriptive report may have prepared at the time of the 1993 survey, but if this is the case it has still to come to light. What we can say is that an interpretative description is a fundamental requirement for the future.

In brief the site lies within three contiguous tracts of mature broadleaved woodland and two pasture fields, a total area of nearly 12 hectares. The house platforms form two discrete groups, both below south-facing natural scarps and on the plateau above are a number of stone banked enclosures and fields, and some trackways which present an irregular appearance and even if not of two or more phases suggest a rather haphazard aggregation of new elements to an existing core. Almost certainly later is a substantial embanked rectangular enclosure which overlies a bank of the field/enclosure system. And because of their proximity, this could be contemporary with another near square enclosure which contains the low foundations of a house (perhaps a long house, from its length) and a platform set at right angle to it. Together these suggest a discrete farm complex set across the earlier fields and enclosures of the more nucleated settlement represented by the house platforms. It is possible but as yet unproven that a second similar farm complex lay just to the south,

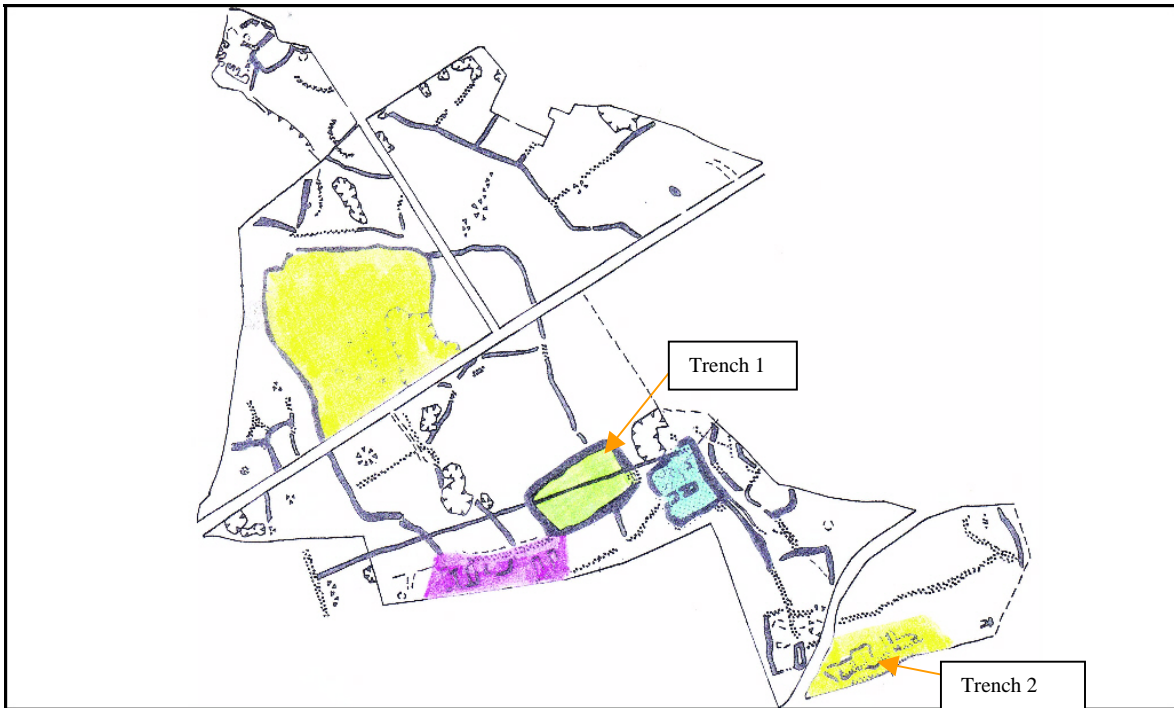


Fig 1 Hen Caerwys earthworks showing the location of the two trenches. Unscaled.

The complex is completed by other features which have yet to be fully understood further north in the pasture, both small and large quarry pits, probably of various dates, and occasional lengths of isolated bank which don't immediately fit into the general pattern. A very ruined lime kiln is located in the western corner of the wood in which the large enclosure stands.

The 2011 geophysical survey was restricted to the interiors of the large rectangular enclosure and adjacent enclosure containing a possible longhouse to the east. The results were difficult to interpret due to the limited area covered but one very distinct high resistance anomaly was identified in the north-eastern corner of the larger enclosure and interpreted by the surveyors as a possible collapsed structure.

The excavations

The excavations took place over a five-day period in the middle of July, with two specific aims in mind. One was to involve local communities in a short-term excavation with a view to assessing the potential for a longer-term community project. The second was to examine the nature of the rectangular enclosure mentioned above and to test whether the geophysical anomaly seen within it had any archaeological significance, and also to confirm that some of the few records that had survived of the excavation of the second house in the 1960s could be linked to a specific earthwork platform.

The enclosure

The rectangular enclosure is defined by a low stony bank, without any surface of an external ditch, encompassing an internal area of 0.21 hectares. The bank is distinguishable for its entire circuit, and the only apparent entrance gap is where the

bank drops in height close to the south-east corner. One of the more recent features on the Hen Caerwys site, a straight linear bank running west-north-west/east-south-east, but of uncertain function, lies over the enclosure bank immediately to the north of this entrance. The position of the entrance is of significance in its proximity to the adjacent homestead enclosure.

The excavation trench, immediately to the south of the north-east corner, was 14.9m long and 3m wide with an extension of 4.6m by 1.5m further to the west separated by a gap of 4m. The enclosure bank at this point was approximately 6m wide with a height of about 0.35m above the interior and 0.5m above the external surface. There was no indication of its original form of construction, although a little further south there appeared to be a small exposure of slab wall face.

Stripping the bank of its thin surface cover of roots and humic material exposed the limestone rubble of the bank which initially appeared to have a core of small stone with larger blocks forming a potential edge on the outside, but less convincingly so on the inner face, and collapsed rubble spreading out on both sides. The bank was then sectioned in a narrower cutting, 1.5m wide, demonstrating that any indications of a wall here were illusory. It resolved itself into a bank of dumped rubble with some evidence of larger lumps of rubble forming the front and back faces, although differentiating these from the collapsed material proved difficult. The section through the bank was not completely excavated, but hopefully it may be possible to return to this in a future year.



Fig 2 The excavation across the enclosure bank from the south-east. CPAT 3321-0029

Limestone bedrock in the form of 'limestone pavement' was uncovered on both sides of the bank. Enough was stripped outside the bank to confirm that there was no ditch around the enclosure. Internally, the expanse of pavement was sufficient to

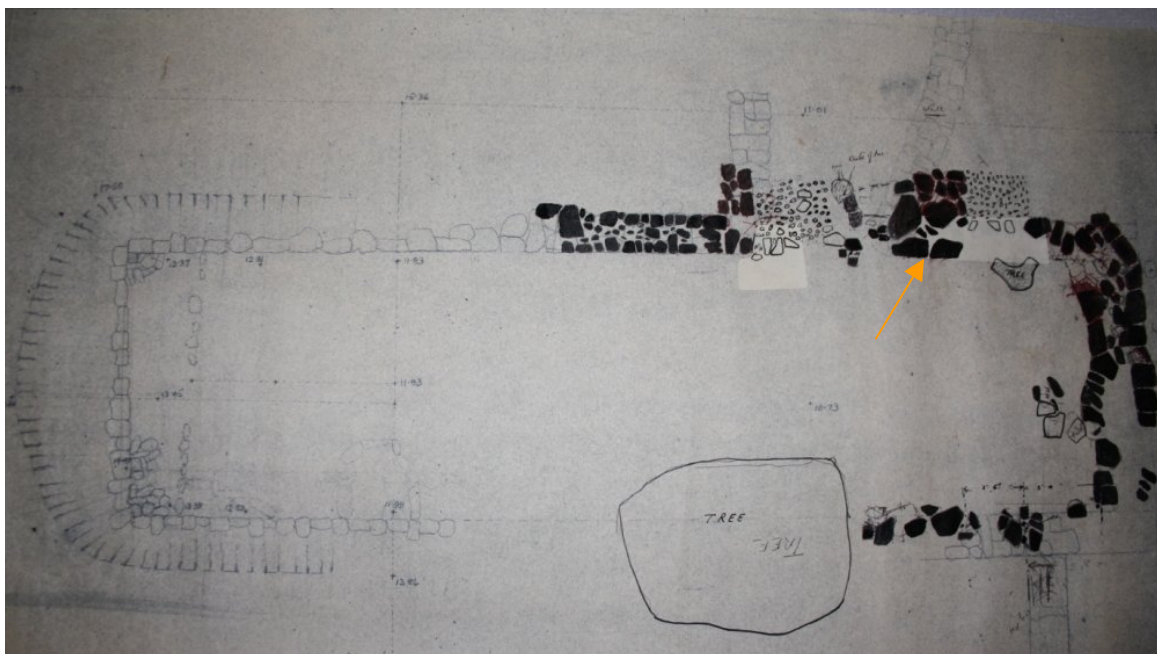
demonstrate that the anomaly shown up in the geophysical survey was probably related to changes in the form or depth of the bedrock rather than by human activity.

In the western extension, limestone pavement was encountered at a depth of around 0.30m below the surface, with a mix of humic soil and limestone lumps forming the overlying material and only stratum. This increased in depth further into the enclosure, though not significantly so. There were no traces of the bank that had originally run from north to south before the construction of the enclosure though it is reasonable to think that some of the limestone rubble mixed with the humic soil was derived from it.

Artefacts were extremely sparse. A small flint possibly with some evidence of working, was recovered from amongst the rubble that had collapsed at the front of the enclosure. A very small horseshoe from the western extension has been tentatively attributed a medieval date, but awaits confirmation by a specialist.

The house platform

The second excavation was positioned at the southern end of a house platform which it was thought had been excavated but very poorly recorded by Leach and Pennant Williams in 1966 through to 1968. The only drawings to have survived are one or two incomplete plans held in Flintshire County Council's archive store at Shotton. Sufficient detail is shown on these small site plans to allow an attempt to position the 1960s excavations, assuming that our assumptions about the visible site remains are correct (Fig 3).



A trench, 4m by 4m, was opened up on the platform where a small patch of limestone rubble projected above the general ground level, on the presumed line of the eastern wall of the building. Removal of the surface layer of humic material and roots exposed a general spread of limestone rubble across the entire area at a depth of around 0.15m below the ground surface. In the north-west corner of the trench, a small sondage 0.4m square was taken to a lower level. This revealed more rubble some of it tipping downwards at a slight angle as if to suggest subsidence into a feature or natural dip. Beneath the stones, but also in places lapping up against them was a red-brown sandy clay which was provisionally identified as a natural subsoil.



Fig 4 The excavation across the southern end of House 2. CPAT 3321-0037

Whilst the uncovered footings superficially resembled in plan the eastern wall of the house with a possible south-eastern entrance as depicted on Fig. 2, several inconsistencies that remain to be resolved if we are confidently to identify this as Leach and Pennant Williams' 'House 2'. Most notable were the absence of both an apparent cobbled threshold and several pencilled-in external walls. It is possible that Leach and Pennant Williams may have mistaken more elevated sections of the ubiquitous rubble layer for such features.

No artefacts contemporary with the likely occupation of the house site were recovered from this excavation.

Community involvement

This is considered to have been a very successful project. The actual figures given in the table below are a measure of its success. Open days were held on the Saturday and Sunday, having been publicised locally, and more widely on web sites, and the turn out on the Sunday was remarkable, given that it rained from mid-morning throughout the rest of the day. The majority of visitors and volunteers came from Flintshire and Denbighshire, several coming from further afield across the English Border.

| | Professional staff | Volunteers | Visitors |
|------------------|--------------------|------------|----------|
| Thursday 14 July | 3 | 10 | 5 |
| Friday 15 July | 2 | 12 | 5 |
| Saturday 16 July | 4 | 11 | 53 |
| Sunday 17 July | 4 | 11 | 18 |
| Monday 18 July | 3 | 9 | 6 (10) |

Conclusions

The primary focus of the excavations was the rectangular enclosure, and virtually all the results were negative ones, though nonetheless useful.

Traditionally the enclosure was known as the 'cart pool', but while this may enhance the interest of the narrative, it is clearly misleading. The enclosure could not have functioned as a pond - an impervious clay coating would have been required to retain water. The enclosing bank was a rubble dump with very little structure to it, and there is no evidence from surface observation or from excavation of any features in the interior, contemporary with its use. This is reinforced by the fact that the general shallowness of the soils and the nature of the limestone encouraged settlers to build up rather than dig down, and that sub-surface features are unlikely except for quarrying and mining. In the light of the excavations the writer continues to hold to his view that this was a stock pound.

The second trench across one of the southernmost house platforms has not conclusively demonstrated that this was the one excavated from 1966, but nor did it produce anything that would contradict such a view. Both excavation sites were covered in a membrane before they were backfilled in order to facilitate their re-opening in future years.