

The Stones of Stonehenge Project

Interim Report 2017



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Summary

Investigations by the Stones of Stonehenge project in 2017 moved from study of the bluestone quarries to exploration of the prehistoric landscape in which the quarries and other bluestone sources were located.

The main discoveries were of a probable dismantled stone circle at Waun Mawn and a complex of Iron Age enclosures at Pensarn, both located in the Brynberian area within a couple of miles of Stonehenge's known bluestone sources.

Continuation of geophysical survey around and beyond Pensarn, where the enclosure complex was discovered by magnetometry in 2016, identified two mounds as probable prehistoric features, one to the north-northeast of the Pensarn complex and the other to its east. That to the east, 500m away, is topographically approximately the same size and extremely similar in its geophysical signature to the one excavated at Pensarn in 2016 which was found to be an Early Bronze Age kerb cairn dating to c.2000 BC. The geophysical results from the feature to the north-northeast (500m away) were inconclusive. The mound here was flatter and with a larger circumference than the other two mounds. Its geophysical signature indicates it has likely to have been heavily disturbed.

The bluestone quarries of Craig Rhos-y-felin and Carn Goedog: providing a context for the 'original' Stonehenge

After many seasons of research at Craig Rhos-y-felin (2011-2015) and Carn Goedog (2014-2016), final sets of radiocarbon dates were obtained to reveal that monolith-extraction features identified at each site were constructed and used in the final centuries of the fourth millennium BC. At Craig Rhos-y-felin these included an artificial stone platform, revetted by a drystone wall to provide a 0.9m drop onto a relict stream bed within which a hollow way led away from the quarry (Parker Pearson *et al.* 2015). These features, interpreted as a loading bay and exit ramp for loading monoliths onto sledges and dragging them out of the quarry, are covered by a thick deposit of river silt containing charcoal dating to c.3400-2900 BC. They are broadly contemporary with the Neolithic occupation area against the side of the outcrop, close to the spot where a 2.5m-long bluestone monolith has been removed.

At Carn Goedog further radiocarbon dates were obtained from charcoal within and beneath the artificial stone platform against the south side of the outcrop to confirm its construction and use in the final centuries of the fourth millennium BC, predominantly in 3300-2900 BC. The final date of 3020-2880 BC coincides with a similar date from the 11m-long, stone-filled ditch that was dug between the platform and the area beyond the quarry. Since the size and packing of stone within this ditch were sufficient to prevent monoliths being moved out of the quarry, it may have signified the blocking-off of the megalith-quarry. Its date is, interestingly, almost identical to that for construction of the Aubrey Holes at Stonehenge, the pits into which Stonehenge's bluestones are thought to have been first erected there.

Among the many stone tools associated with the Neolithic quarrying deposits was an assemblage of wedge-shaped stones exhibiting retouching and damage along their narrow blades and on their thick-ended butts. Scrape marks on one of these tools indicate its having been slid against another hard substance. These can be interpreted as stone wedges, used

to open up the natural jointing between the dolerite pillars before easing each pillar away from the face of the outcrop and onto the artificial stone platform below. They probably represent the non-perishable element of a quarrying assemblage that included mostly perishable tools consisting of wooden wedges, antler and wooden hammers, timber rails and A-frames, and ropes. The fact that these stone were made of soft rocks – mudstones and sandstones – suggests that Neolithic quarry-workers were aware of the need to avoid causing stress fractures in the dolerite pillars that might be caused with wedges of the same hardness as the dolerite.

Dates from Carn Goedog and Craig Rhos-y-felin also indicate a lengthy if intermittent presence of Mesolithic hunter-gatherers at these two outcrops, despite the absence of Mesolithic stone tools at both sites. Whilst that presence largely finished before the fifth millennium BC at Craig Rhos-y-felin it continued throughout the fifth millennium at Carn Goedog. It remains a possibility that this outcrop, if not both of them, may have held some significance for these hunter-gatherers before the arrival of farmers and farming around 4000 BC.



Figure 1. Locations of bluestone sources (yellow) and prehistoric sites (red) around Pensarn.

Waun Mawn: a dismantled stone circle – the ‘original Stonehenge’?

For nearly a century, archaeologists have wondered whether the arc of four standing stones at Waun Mawn might be part of a dismantled former stone circle (RCAHMW 1925: 258-9). Its single standing stone and three fallen stones form an arc which has been estimated as potentially the remnants of a circle over 100m in diameter. Subsequent researchers were, however, unconvinced. Prof. W.F. Grimes, director of the Institute of Archaeology in London considered it as nothing more than a group of former standing stones (1963: 149-50) whilst Aubrey Burl left it out of his gazetteer of stone circles (1976).



Figure 2. Waun Mawn stone circle viewed from the east.

Initially identified by the Stones of Stonehenge project in 2010 as a potential location for the bluestones prior to their transportation to Stonehenge in the Neolithic, Waun Mawn's apparent remoteness and high elevation above the more fertile soils of the Nevern Valley led to it being considered as a lesser priority for investigation than various locations with circular earthworks lower down the valley such as Castell Mawr Early Iron Age hillfort (Parker Pearson *et al.* 2017), Bayvil Late Bronze Age ringfort (Parker Pearson *et al.* in press) and Felindre Farchog early medieval burial ground (Casswell *et al.* in press).

In September 2017 we opened six trenches at Waun Mawn, two of them around the outer two recumbent stones and two pairs of trenches on the east and west sides at each end of the arc. The aims were to obtain dating material for the erection and fall of the two

recumbent stones and to find out whether the arc might have continued beyond its ends to once have formed a circle.



Figure 3. Waun Mawn stone circle viewed from above; north is at the top.

Waun Mawn, as the name suggests ('peat moorland'), is a wet, peaty upland on which blanket bog has created a continuous surface layer of peat and creating severely gleyed podzol soils in which the old ground surface beneath the peat has become demineralised, leading to migration of iron and other minerals downwards to the top of the subsoil where it forms a layer of iron panning. Magnetometer survey in 2011 failed to identify any sub-surface features that might be stone sockets extending the length of the arc, and these negative results were put down to the problems created by podzolisation. However, the excavation results of 2017 indicate that the potential stone circle may have had a diameter much wider than that envisaged in 2011 in which the surveyed area was not sufficiently wide to cover the likely locations of stone sockets.

The largest recumbent stone excavated in 2017 is that on the west side (Trench 3). It is over 3m long and lies with its top end to the southeast. Its large stone socket is lined with many packing stones. Of the five identified layers within the stone socket, the top three contain quantities of peat, accumulated after the stone fell over. The fallen stone lies on the peat with some relatively large stones appearing to be props and set on top of the basal peat layer. Thus the stone went down after the onset of peat growth and very possibly by human action if the underlying prop stones were placed there. However, if pushed over, it was not

modified any further nor is there any evidence that attempts were made to break it up or to move it.



Figure 4. The large recumbent stone excavated in Trench 3, viewed from the south; its stone socket is on the left side beneath its end.

The smaller recumbent stone excavated in 2017 is on the east end of the arc (Trench 4) and is just under 1m long. Its former top end lies to the north and exhibits a break where its end has sheared off. The well-weathered surfaces of this break indicate that this occurred probably before the Holocene, though such wear could conceivably be a product of long-term exposure and erosion from animal rubbing over the last 5,000 years or so. The recumbent stone lies on a bed of small prop-stones set into the peat, similar to that for the larger fallen stone. Yet its stone socket is smaller with just two small packing stones. The single layer within the stone socket contains only brown loam and no peat, indicating that it filled before the growth of peat. Thus this stone came down before peat growth but it must have been eased out of the peat at a much later date and set on prop stones themselves set on top of peat. As with the other recumbent stone, there is no evidence that the stone was modified in any way during or after this last action.

Trenches 1 and 6 revealed no significant archaeological deposits other than a relatively recent trackway formed by small broken stones, peaty clay and a pair of wheel ruts in Trench 6. In contrast, stone sockets with stone packing were identified in Trenches 2 and 5. In Trench 2 two large stones set on edge in the south side of a 0.85m-diameter, 0.3m-deep circular pit formed the packing for a removed standing stone. These packing stones were set within a brown loam similar to that of the stone socket within Trench 4. Although the pit was cut into the old land surface, its surface could not be defined initially because of the

homogenising pipe-clay discoloration of the sub-peat soil due to podzolisation. However, below a depth of c.30mm the soft, brown fill of the pit could be clearly seen. The angle of the packing stones indicates that the standing stone formerly set in this hole was removed towards the north. A small posthole (0.6m x 0.45m x 0.17m deep with two small packing stones) was detected c.5m southeast of the stone socket.



Figure 5. The small recumbent stone excavated in Trench 4, viewed from the west; its stone socket is on the right, marked by two red plastic pegs.

The emptied stone socket excavated in Trench 5 was very similar to that in Trench 2 with a similar brown loam fill, except that the two large packing stones were angled against the side and base of the pit's southern edge, indicating that the monolith in this instance had been removed towards the south.

All the features were 50% excavated, leaving half of the fill intact for future excavation. The 50% of each pit fill which was excavated was fully sampled for flotation. Whilst organic remains of peat and carbonised material were recovered from the post-extraction layers of the fallen monolith in Trench 3, no noticeable carbonised materials were recovered from the brown loam fills of the other stone sockets other than a few tiny flecks of charcoal, too small for radiocarbon-dating. Future strategies to date the fills of these stone sockets will involve optically stimulated luminescence (OSL) if no suitable radiocarbon samples can be retrieved. Until absolute dates are available, it can be assumed that the lack of peat in three of the stone sockets indicates that their standing stones were removed before the growth of blanket bog. This can be assumed to have started growing around 3,000 years ago, which would indicate that the stones came down in the earlier Bronze Age or Neolithic.



Figure 6. The emptied stone socket in Trench 2, viewed from the east.



Figure 7. The emptied stone socket in Trench 5, viewed from the east.

The discovery of two empty stone sockets at each end of the arc raises the possibility that the Waun Mawn monument represents the residue of what was once a large stone circle, as originally speculated upon by the Royal Commission in 1925. Three of the stones still present are likely to be of unspotted dolerite but the small recumbent stone in Trench 4 is of spotted dolerite, indicating that its source lies over 2 miles to the east. The newly discovered sockets increase the arc to 80m long. Should it form part of an original stone circle then that circle's diameter is likely to have been c.115-120m. This would make it the largest known stone circle in Britain other than Avebury. It would be narrowly bigger than Stanton Drew in Somerset, Long Meg and her Daughters in Cumbria, and the Ring of Brodgar in Orkney.

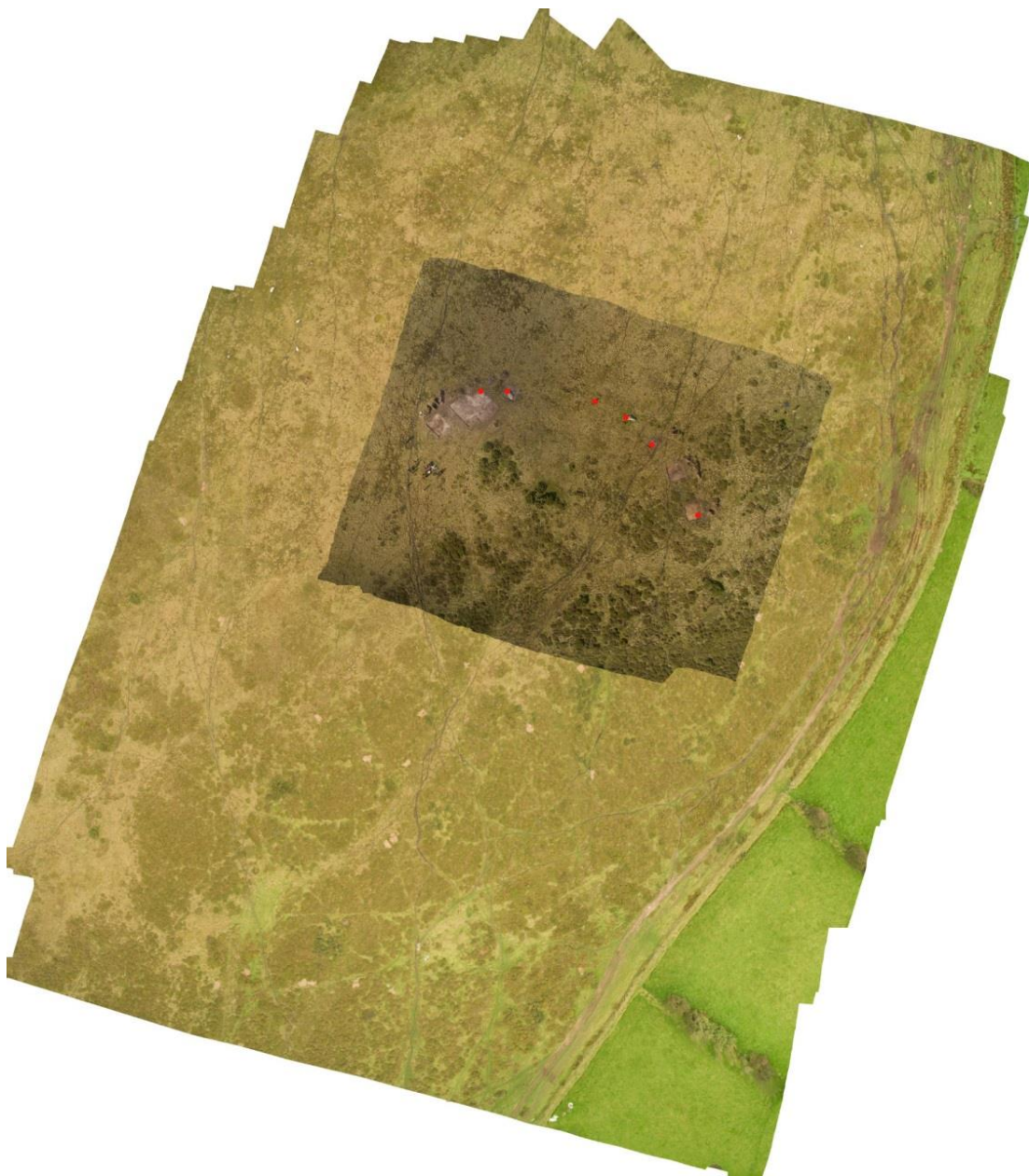


Figure 8. Plan of the 2017 trenches at Waun Mawn. The four stone sockets and two other stones are shown in red, indicating the 80m-long arc that they form.

The mix of dolerite lithologies (spotted and unspotted), the proximity of four of Stonehenge's bluestone sources eastwards along the ridge and within the Nevern river catchment below make Waun Mawn a very promising candidate for the former location of Stonehenge's bluestones prior to their transport to Salisbury Plain to form Stonehenge's first stage in 3020-2880 BC. The location is also remarkable, perched on a ridge with views to Ireland and Snowdonia and sitting directly above the source of the River Nevern along its Brynberian tributary.

Finally, mention should be made of Geoffrey of Monmouth's 12th-century account of how Stonehenge was built of stones from Ireland where they had previously been erected on a mountain top by giants as a stone circle known as the Dance of the Giants (*chorea gigantum*). Whether or not there is any grain of truth in Geoffrey's story, should the arc at Waun Mawn prove with further investigation to be a full circle then its size and location would make it a fitting monument to be known as the Giants' Dance.

Pensarn: a group of Iron Age enclosures beside the confluence of the Brynberian and Carn Goedog tributaries of the River Nevern

In 2015, a large ringwork was identified by drone-enabled aerial photogrammetry at Pensarn on the top of a low hill with fine views in all directions. Magnetometer survey in September 2016 revealed that this ringwork formed one of four ditched enclosures, the others being located in a cluster to its west. This group lies about 150m southwest of the Early Bronze Age kerb cairn (c.2000 BC) excavated in 2016. The geological sequence underlying the enclosures is rhyolite underneath glacial till, covered by brown clay loam.

All four enclosures were evaluated in September 2017 with excavation trenches dug to sample their enclosing ditches and, in the case of the two largest enclosures, to sample their interiors to establish whether these were Neolithic henges.

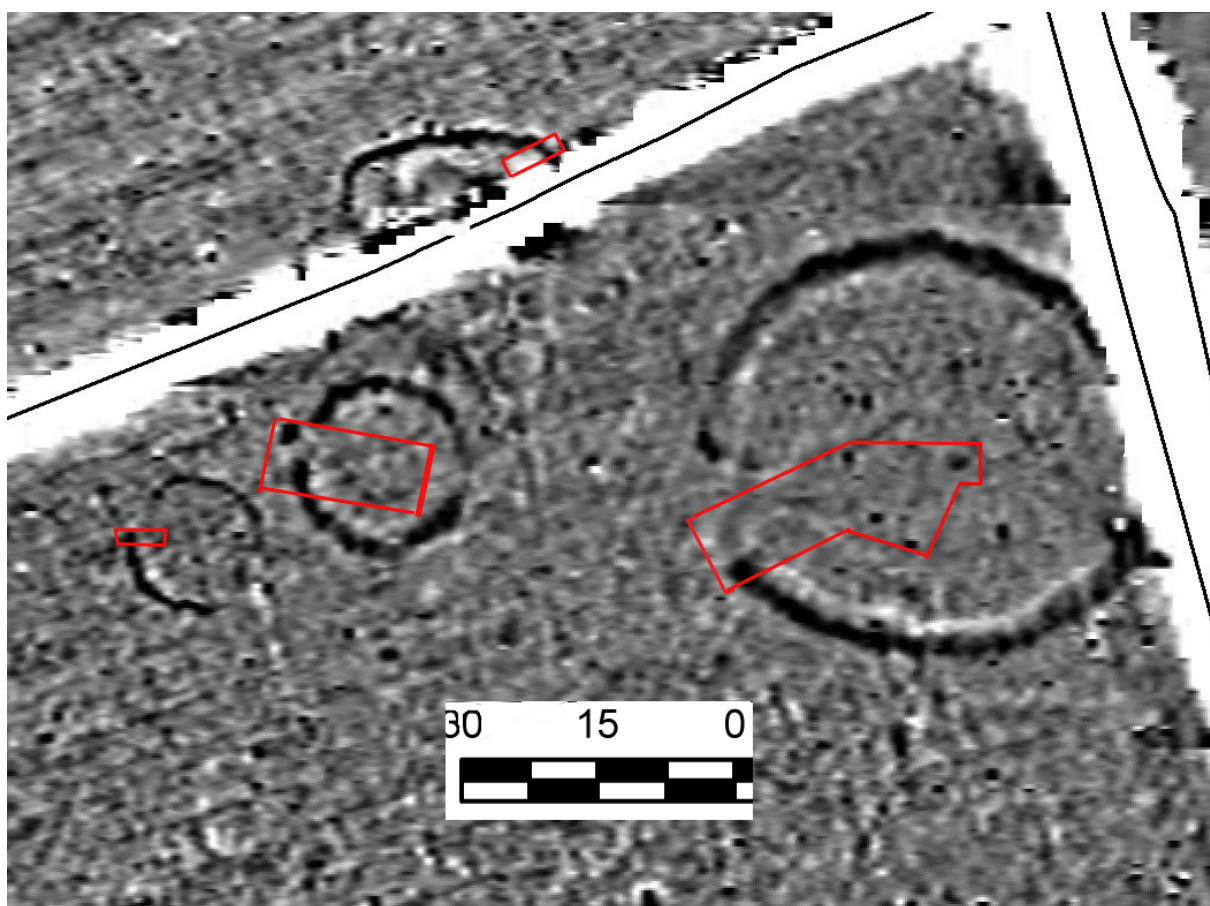


Figure 9. Magnetometry plot of the Pensarn complex; north is at the top.

The large enclosure

This 60m-diameter circular Iron Age ditched enclosure occupies the crown of the hill on the 135m OD contour. Its internal bank is just visible as a very slight earthwork and, on excavation, survives as a 0.05m-high layer of redeposited subsoil on top of a buried soil protected from recent ploughing by the base of the bank. The ditch is 1.7m deep and 4.5m wide with a rectangular ended terminal. This forms the south side of a 10m-wide, east-southeast-facing entrance.

The ditch was filled with a 1.4m-deep layer of large, mostly sub-angular stones deposited upon a thin primary layer of sediment. Above the stone layer, a series of dark brown-black sediments filled the ditch to the top. Finds from these upper layers included pieces of smithing slag and a turquoise glass bead.

The large quantity of stones in the lower fill of the ditch indicates that these were put here soon after the ditch was dug. They may have once formed a defensive wall on top of the enclosure's bank but their deposition within the ditch shows no evident angle of pitch from the direction of the enclosure's interior. This rapid infilling onto thin primary silts suggests that the defences constituted by the ditch and bank were slighted or compromised shortly after construction.

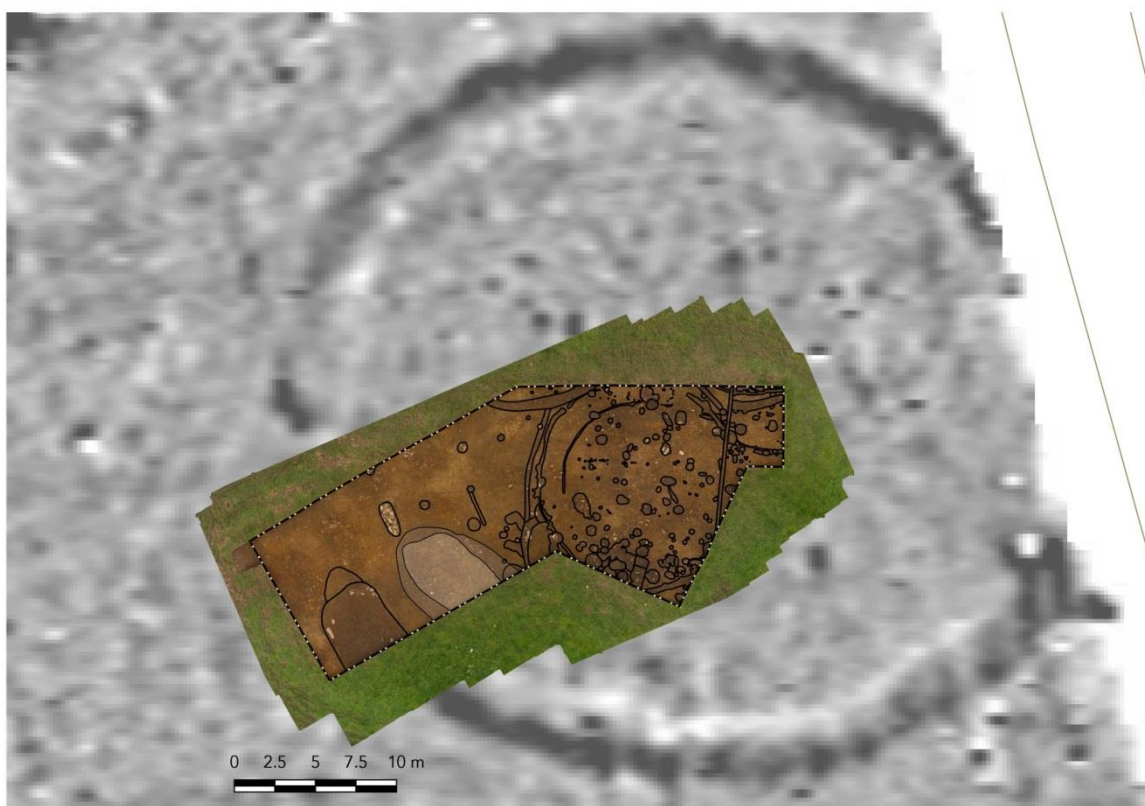


Figure 10. The trench through the large Iron Age enclosure.

The southern half of the entrance into the enclosure lay within the excavation trench. It consisted of three successive portals formed by postholes and post slots. The outermost of these features consisted of a stone-filled slot, 2.5m long x 0.5m wide and 0.8m deep, which had held a row of large posts. South of it a line of three stone-packed postholes ran along the spine of the bank, presumably forming the vertical supports of a former rampart. The middle portal was formed by two large postholes flanking the entrance. The innermost portal was formed similarly by two large postholes with slots running from them to the inner edge of the bank. Small flat stones formed a broken-up surface which is all that remains of the surface of the passageway into the enclosure, this old ground surface having been protected from later ploughing by spreading of the enclosure's bank.

The depth of subsequent ploughing in the interior of this Iron Age enclosure has been ameliorated by protection from its surrounding earthworks, with about 0.10m of the original ground surface having been truncated. Thus no hearths or floors survive within the interior but stakeholes and other shallow features could be identified.

Inside the enclosure, a number of curvilinear gullies indicate the position of a multi-phase Iron Age roundhouse within the eastern half of the excavation trench. Its eavesdrip gully was 12m in diameter and the roundhouse itself, indicated by its wall slot, was 10m in diameter. The eavesdrip gully was cut by the ditch of a sub-rectangular enclosure, indicating that the circular enclosure's interior was reorganised when the roundhouse went out of use. A length of eavesdrip gully detected in the small northern extension of the trench indicates that there was also a northern roundhouse within the circular enclosure.

The entrance to the roundhouse is likely to have been in the east, where two possible door postholes sit inside a pair of small pits. A stakehole in this entrance area contained a fragment of a shale armring. Three postholes within the centre of the building may have formed part of an originally square array of roof-bearing posts (though a fourth posthole was not confirmed). A mass of pits with dark fills that included calcined bones, large quantities of burnt stone, charcoal and a quernstone in the south of the house indicate that this was an area where cooking and food preparation were carried out. High proportions of burnt stone (but not calcined bone) in pits in the southwest sector indicate domestic activities here too. The scarcity of features in the northern half is consistent with this area being the sleeping area.

At the very centre of the enclosure, on what would have been the very top of the hill, a small rectangular pit, 0.9m N-S x 0.3m E-W and 0.14m deep, contained a mass of chips (1.3kg) of spotted dolerite within a fill of carbonised materials and black soil including calcined bone. None of the chips appear to conjoin though they probably all come off a single block or pillar of some size. Surface flakes indicate that this block or pillar was obtained from the outcrops two miles to the south and not from a stream bed. The block had clearly been subjected to burning of its outer surface as well as flaking. This feature appears to have been a socket for a standing stone, destroyed in the Iron Age.

No pottery was recovered from any of the features within the enclosure, although two sherds of Roman pottery were found in the ploughsoil, one of them on top of the enclosure bank. The circular enclosure and its roundhouse probably date to the Early Iron Age.



Figure 11. The stonehole filled with spotted dolerite flakes at the centre of the large enclosure, viewed from the southwest.

The smaller circular enclosure

This 20m-diameter Late Iron Age circular enclosure is situated 100m west of the summit of the hill in an area of quartz-rich till. Its ditch is 1.7m wide and 0.85m deep. Low magnetic readings along the interior edges of the enclosure suggest that its bank was inside the ditch, confirmed by evidence for primary silts coming into the ditch from the interior. However, a secondary fill derives from outside the ditch, suggesting that it may also have had an outer bank or counterscarp. The ditch has a slight break in its line some 4m from its southern terminal, suggestive of having been dug in short segments. Finds from the ditch include struck quartz flakes and a scraper.

Immediately in front of the 3.9m-wide, east-northeast-facing entrance to the enclosure is a 0.7m-deep, 2m-wide circular pit, dating to the end of the Late Bronze Age (820-760 BC), into which a series of artefacts were placed in its basal layer. These consist of a large stone saddle quern, a small quern, a top stone (the upper stone or rubber used on a saddle quern), two hammer stones, a group of waterworn pebbles and a cluster of 19 hand-formed 'buns' of daub. These are clearly not domestic rubbish and constitute a carefully arranged 'structured deposit'. They were covered by a series of fills that included sherds of plain pottery.

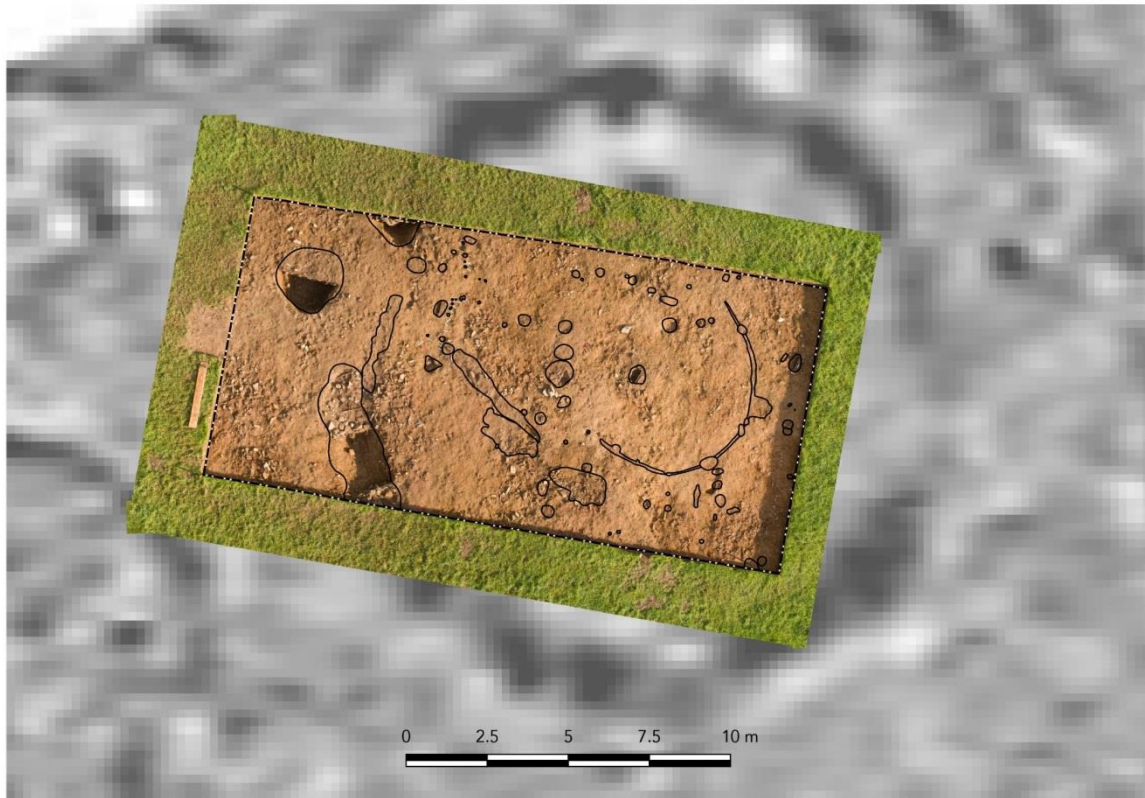


Figure 12. The trench within the smaller enclosure.

The fourth linear feature within this enclosure is a narrow, shallow semi-circular gully that is open to the northwest. It encloses an area 2.3m SW-NE x 5.2m NW-SE. The gully is up to 0.1m wide and is not an eavesdrip gully but more likely the shallow foundations of a small roundhouse's wattle wall. Finds from its fill included five quartz scrapers and other struck quartz.

Within the ring gully are two small, circular bowl-profiled pits. One is in the centre of the enclosure and contained a block of spotted dolerite, baked clay and much carbonised material. The other, to its northeast, contained sherds of a pot with a rolled rim which is probably Late Bronze Age, similar to pottery in the entrance pit.

Across the entrance to the enclosure lay a 2.5m-long X 0.4m-wide x 0.5m-deep slot which may have held a row of posts. It also contained a small iron tapered bar. A line of over 20 stakeholes formed a barrier across the inside of the enclosure's entrance, but could be part of this later building. Inside the enclosure, another slot (4.5m x 0.7m x 0.2m deep) positioned obliquely to the entrance slot, may also have held a row of small posts.

Overall, finds from the enclosure ditch and its interior features consist largely of struck quartz and quartz tools. Most of these are of a finer, less flawed raw material than the naturally occurring quartz lumps. There is also a copious assemblage of deliberately smashed and broken quartz, mostly derived from human transformation of this more flawed *in situ* material. No struck flint was recovered, and there was just one chip of chert.

Curiously, there was only one quartz flake amongst the otherwise rich artefact assemblage in the Late Bronze Age circular pit outside the enclosure entrance.



Figure 13. The large pit in front of the entrance to the enclosure, showing the distribution of artefacts in its primary fill, viewed from the southwest.

The smallest circular enclosure

A short length of this enclosure ditch's south terminal was excavated to reveal a shallow, flat-bottomed profile with a small posthole in the terminal. No lithics or other finds were recovered from the ditch fill although roundwood charcoal provides a radiocarbon date which falls in the Late Iron Age. The enclosure is 15m in diameter and its entrance faces towards the east-northeast and is about 4m wide. Magnetometry results suggest that its bank was inside its ditch although no trace of the bank survived within the excavated area.

The sub-rectangular enclosure

The northern half of this Late Iron Age feature was traced by magnetometry but its southern half is largely buried beneath a modern hedge. The enclosure is 20m east-west and at least 5m north-south but unlikely to be more than 10m wide. Its two northern corners are rounded. The northeast corner was excavated, revealing a steep-sided, flat-bottomed ditch 1m wide and 0.7m deep. Carbonised material was found throughout its fill but there were no identifiable artefacts other than burnt stone. The upper fill was packed with medium-sized (10-30cm) stones. No bank survived but silt lines in the ditch indicate that a bank had once stood on the inside of the ditch.

An overview of the Pensarn complex

All of the circular enclosures at Pensarn are of Iron Age date. A former standing stone of spotted dolerite appears to have been erected on the top of the hill before it was destroyed in the Iron Age; its date of erection is unknown but it might have been in either the Neolithic or the Bronze Age. If it came from Carn Goedog (as should be demonstrable through geochemical analysis) than it would probably be in the Neolithic since there is no evidence for pillar extraction from that outcrop in the Bronze Age.

During the Early Bronze Age, around 2000 BC, a large, two-phase kerb cairn, 27m in diameter, was constructed of local rhyolite blocks some 150m to the north-northeast of the hill's summit (Parker Pearson *et al.* 2016). Cremated human remains of a minimum of five individuals were recovered from this burial cairn, associated with a complete Food Vessel Urn and fragments of at least two other Food Vessels. The cairn's central cist contained Plain Ware pottery of Middle Bronze Age date, mixed with cremated human bones, indicating that this central, primary feature was emptied out and re-filled, with the capstone replaced, some 500 years after its initial construction. Two mounds to the northeast and north may similarly be Early Bronze Age burial cairns. This potential group of three may thus have formed a small Early Bronze Age funerary complex.



Figure 14. The Early Bronze Age kerb cairn excavated in 2016; north is at the top left.

At the very end of the Late Bronze Age, a large pit was dug 170m southwest of the Early Bronze Age kerb cairn. This pit contained a group of quernstones and pottery.

The large Iron Age fortified enclosure may have been the next monument to be constructed within this complex. It probably dates to the earlier part of the Iron Age c.750-400 BC (on

the basis of its large roundhouse diameter and other characteristics (*cf* Castell Mawr; Parker Pearson *et al.* 2017). The smaller enclosures west of it appear to date to the Late Iron Age.

Late fourth millennium BC dates for charcoal-rich silt layers accumulated against megalith-quarrying structures at Craig Rhos-y-felin indicate upstream forest clearance and breaking of ground consistent with Middle Neolithic cultivation along valley sides around Pensarn and/or Brynberian. Together with similar dates from the Carn Goedog megalith quarry, this suggests a focus of Middle Neolithic human activity in the upper reaches of the Nevern valley. This contrasts with the distribution of Early Neolithic activity, as represented by the distribution of portal dolmens, in the coastal zone and lower Nevern valley. This geographical pattern suggests that Neolithic communities within the Nevern valley gradually moved upstream over some 600 years after c.4000/3800 BC, clearing and cultivating new land towards the river's source. This arm of the upper Nevern was possibly preferred over the eastern arm because access along that tributary is constrained by a waterfall and narrow gorge below Castell Mawr.

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