

Archaeology Wales

Sarn Helen Roman Road, Lledrod, Ceredigion

Archaeological Excavation



By

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Report No. 1353

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June 2015

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Summary

Archaeology Wales were commissioned by Trisgell Ltd to monitor an excavation of a section of Sarn Helen Roman road at Lledrod, Ceredigion. The excavation formed the focus for an episode of a television series for S4C 'Olion, palu am hanes' (2014). Two trenches were excavated across a parch mark identified in a RCAHMW aerial photograph. A 6m wide road agger running north to south was discovered and recorded in both trenches, and a single roadside ditch was excavated within Trench 2. Two probable Roman hobnails were discovered on the road surface within Trench 1. The excavation confirmed a section of road route between Llanio and Trawscoed, as suggested by Schlee in 2005 and the RCAHMW interpretation of the parch mark in 2006.

Fe gomisiynwyd Archaeology Wales gan gwmni teledu Trsisgell i oruchwylio'r gwaith cloddio ar ran posib o ffordd Rufeinig Sarn Elen yn Lledrod, Ceredigion. Pwrpas y gwaith oedd cadarnhau damcaniaeth bod rhan o ffordd Rufeinig Sarn Elen yn y cae i'r dwyrain o bentref Lledrod a dangos y gwaith cloddio ar gyfres deledu S4C, 'Olion, palu am hanes' (2014). Fe gloddiwyd dwy ffos a darganfuwyd olion o ager ffordd gyda dwy hoelen esgidiau Rhufeinig ar y wyneb. Roedd y ffordd yn 6m o led gyda ffos ar un ochr, ac yn rhedeg o'r de i'r gogledd yn y cae.

1. Introduction

Aerial photographs taken by the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales aerial reconnaissance team (AP_2006_3820 and 3821) feature parch marks possibly representing a section of a Roman Road agger (NGR: SN 6549 6964; NPRN 209280). This section of road may be a part of the Pennal to Llanio Roman road known as Sarn Helen (NPRN 303531). Archaeology Wales were commissioned in September 2013 to monitor an excavation to examine and record a small section of the putative road in the area of the 2006 parch marks for an S4C television series 'Olion: Palu am hanes'. The site was excavated between the 17th and 20th of September 2013.

2. Site Description

Location, Topography, Geology

The site located on land near to Penlan Farm lies approximately 1.3km southeast of Lledrod village at 278m OD and 140m south of the current road (NGR SN 6549 6964; fig. 1, 2). The land comprises improved grassland and rough grazing surrounded by heath and moorland with bracken, gorse and oak woodlands. The local geology consists of Borth Mudstones formation underlying Devensian till and wet acid loamy and clayey soils (BGS 2015; Soilscales Viewer 2015).

3. Historical Background and Previous Archaeological Work

An aerial photograph taken in 2006 (RCAHMW reference: AP 2006 3821) shows

a north to south linear parch mark that is approximately 50m long and 4.5 to 5m wide, 130m south of the current minor road heading south-east of Lledrod village (Fig 2). To the north of this, a darker linear anomaly on the same alignment appears to represent another section of the same anomaly, although it is difficult to explain why this appears to be sunken rather than shallow and parched.

The word Sarn (causeway or stepping stones) may derive from the Roman occupation of Wales and several places names in Wales containing the Sarn element possibly refer to an association with the Roman road. Sarn Helen derives from antiquarian references to Elen, supposed wife of Magnus Maximus, the Roman governor of Britain (d. AD 388) (Morgan & Owen 2007, 436-7). It has been suggested that coastal uses of the name Sarn Helen, however, may be confused with salt transportation as in Sarn (route/causeway) Halen (salt) (Morgan & Owen 2007, 437).

The supposed line of Sarn Helen is marked on OS map maps 2.7km to the south-southeast and the site (SN 65067). Given that Trawscoed Roman fort (NPRN 92311) lies approximately 3km to the north-northwest, the alignment and location of this section of the suggested Roman road at Lledrod is credible. A further 4km north of Trawscoed the name Sarnau Fawr, above Llanfihangel -y- Creuddyn, may well represent name place evidence for the continuation of this road. Cropmark evidence for the continuation of the road has been suggested by Driver at Pyllau Isaf (NGR: SN64397573; NPRN 308513) and Brenan (NGR: SN64337690; NPRN 301293).

The section of the proposed road between Bremia (Llanio) and Trawscoed (RR69c) has a generally agreed route categorized as a series of 'probable' road segments as far north as SN 6542 6816 (Schlee 2005, 26). From this point, two 'suggested' courses have been proposed towards Trawscoed fort, the western most of these routes runs directly under the parch mark identified in 2006. Excavation of this parch mark would either confirm this more likely route or suggest that alternative eastern route is the probable course.

4. Excavation

4.1 Objectives and Strategy

The main objective of the archaeological dig was to examine and record a section of the 2006 parch mark to establish the presence of the road, its make-up and construction method. Preliminary excavation was to be carried out by machine under archaeological supervision to the top of the first significant archaeological horizon. Following this, hand excavation would be used for the remainder of the excavation. The line of the road was clearly visible from the western field boundary as an extended level platform running north to south along the western edge of a ridge of higher ground within the field, and a trench site (Trench 1) was located (east to west) across the platform in the area of the 2006 parch mark (Fig. 2). During the work it was decided to examine the road approximately 100m further south, and a second trench (Trench 2), which was 19.6m long and 1.2m wide, was located near the south-western field boundary (Fig. 2).

4.2 Excavation Results

Trench 1 (figs. 1-8)

Trench 1 measured 14.5m (west to east) by 2.25m (north to south) and was excavated across the line of the putative road. Within the western downslope area of the trench, mechanical excavation revealed a grey-brown clayey silt (1000) topsoil that was 0.25m to 0.30m deep, overlying a grey clay (1010) subsoil. The irregular base of the topsoil suggested recent plough activity. The grey clay subsoil continued throughout the trench and was excavated to a trench depth of 0.5m below ground level at the western end. A metre long lens of Iron Pan was visible, 0.4m below the ground surface, in the grey clay (1010) at the western end of the trench, while further lenses were visible in the east-facing section at the end of the trench.

Approximately 5m from the western end, the topsoil overlay a deposit of brown sand (1001), which continued to be present for a further 4m, after which it visibly darkened to a dark brown sandy deposit (1006) for a further 2.3m. The remainder of the eastern upper stratigraphic sequence mirrored that in the western end of the trench, where the topsoil (1000) overlay a grey clay (1010=1007). Hand excavation of the moderately soft sandy deposit (1001) showed it to be 0.05-0.10m deep. During this process two iron hobnails were located, suggesting human foot traffic along this surface (fig. 11). Below the sand, a 0.05m deep, very compact, grey 'concrete' (1002) composed of compacted coarse gravel was discovered. This deposit was observed some 5.4m from the western end of the trench and continued for a further 3m towards its centre.

It became clear that the deposits located 5m from the western end of the trench were noticeably different to the natural topsoil and subsoil located at the far western end. The location of the edge of these anthropogenic deposits coincided with the point at which the earthwork platform, provisionally interpreted as the edge of the road, began. Hand excavation of the concrete deposit (1002), where it was located within a slot on the northern side of Trench 1, revealed an underlying deposit (1003) of angular stones of varying sizes (0.05m -0.25m in length), which was identified as the road agger surface. A slot was cut through all deposits on the northern side of the trench to a depth of 0.5m below ground surface. This demonstrated that the compact nature of the agger was composed of angular, presumably quarry-derived, stones, together with rounded river stones (fig.7).

The primary phase of road construction appeared to consist of the laying down of a (> 0.30m deep) deposit of large river rolled boulders onto the surface of the natural clay (of which the largest seen was 0.25m by 0.20m). On top of this, a 0.10m deep layer of angular and flattened quarried mudstone, mixed with compacted layer of gravel and smaller stones, was laid. There was evidence of wear in the centre of the road and the larger stones can be seen protruding up through the gravel in the southern, central section (see fig.7). The road is interpreted as being 6m wide or 20.3 *pes* (Roman feet).

The brown sandy deposit (1001) in which the hobnails were discovered overlying the top of the road could represent evidence for its final phase of use and/or abandonment. The absence of a western roadside ditch can presumably be

explained by the natural downslope, which would have performed the same function. It is possible that a patchy dark mottled linear feature located on the eastern edge of the road provided evidence for a ditch on the other side of the road, although this was not corroborated by evidence from Trench 2. It is likely that those constructing the road utilised the edge of a west facing incline located along the western side of the hill in the centre of the field.

Trench 2 (*figs. 2, 9-10*)

The platform of the road seen in Trench 1 could not be clearly seen in the southern lower part of the field where the ridge was not present. A line of ranging rods was inserted into the ground surface, so sight lines could be maintained, and a second trench was cut across its putative course on more level ground in the southern area of the field (see fig. 2).

A 19.6m long and 1.2m wide, east to west aligned, trench was initially machine excavated across the presumed location of the continuation of the road identified in Trench 1.

The first two metres excavated on the eastern side of trench revealed a grey-brown clayey silt topsoil (2000) overlying a natural subsoil described as mottled orange brown with grey brown silty clay (2010). A band of subsoil, described as orange-brown silty clay with charcoal flecks (2005), stretched for 3.2m west of the natural, before a 2m wide, mottled mid-brown and orange clayey loam (2002), interpreted as disturbed or removed metalling, was encountered giving way to a compact stone metallated surface (2001), interpreted as the surviving upper road agger. The agger surface could be traced for a further 5 metres before a pale silty clay with dark brown gritty lenses and occasional gravel (2003) was discovered below the topsoil (2000). Further west, a mottled dark brown silty clay with black mottling may reflect the beginning of bog development as reflected in the vegetation in the field to the west. It is possible that the brown lenses encountered on the west side of the road represents redeposited turf. The charcoal flecks within deposit (2005) on the eastern side of the agger surface suggested that a ditch may be present here and this was investigated. Deposit (2005), consisting of an orange brown silty clay, was found to be the 0.25m deep upper fill of a 1.5m wide and 0.5m deep roadside ditch [2004], which had a steep western edge and a gentle sloping eastern edge and a 0.8m wide relatively flat base (see figs. 3D, 10a). The basal deposit, which was a 0.25m (max depth) deep red silty clay (20012), had a thin lens of mid-brown grey silty clay (2013) running between these deposits. This was more visible and thickest (0.05m deep) on the western side of the ditch cut [2004]. The sequence of deposits suggests at least three main stages of filling events caused by water borne material from the road (2013) and the hillside (2012) above. Large stones (0.15-0.20m visible length) were located within the western edge of the ditch cut [2004] (some of which were dislodged by the mechanical excavator). These marked the beginning of the road agger construction on the eastern side. No ditch was present on the western side of the road, which matches the pattern within Trench 1. No artefacts were recovered on this small section of road surface despite metal detecting during initial machining.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The excavation discovered the remains of a 6m wide metalled road surface in two trenches running in a north to south direction through the field located east of Lledrod, Ceredigion. The road appeared to have only one roadside ditch. A 1.5m wide and 0.5m deep eastern ditch was located and partly excavated within Trench 2. Two corroded and fragmentary ferrous artefacts were recovered from the agger surface within Trench 1, at least one of which, and probably both, is certainly a Roman hobnail. The road appeared to be constructed with a basal deposit of large river-rolled stones, on top of which a deposit of split shale and fractured mudstone was laid. A gravelly deposit and further rounded river stones overlay this. The gravel contained iron panning and had hardened to create a concrete like surface on top of which the hobnails were discovered.

The closest river to the road at this point today is the Wyre, located approximately 1km to the north-west, and it is likely that cart loads of stone would have been procured from the river bed. It is also possible that the river Ystwyth near Trawscoed fort was a source of gravel and stone in this area. The fractured mudstone was probably quarried from back-filled quarry depressions located on the north-eastern edge of the road within the same field as shown within the 2006 aerial photographs.

Other than the hobnails, which closely resembled other examples excavated within Roman contexts, no further dating evidence was recovered. The rather isolated upland location of this section of road would be unlikely to result in occupation related material culture and therefore no conclusions can be drawn from the lack of further datable artefacts. The initial date of the fort construction at Trawscoed was in the late 70s AD and the road must presumably have been constructed at the same time (Davies and Kirby 1994, 301). An abandonment date for the road cannot, of course, be confidently extrapolated from the fort's abandonment date of 125-130AD as others may have continued to use the road for some considerable time. No later dating evidence was discovered within the two trenches to suggest a date for its abandonment.

It can, now, however, be stated confidently that the line of the RR69 road from Llanio to Trawscoed runs along Schlee's 51968 to 51971 route, and thereafter takes the western 'suggested' route through the Penlan field as it heads north towards Trawscoed (Schlee 2005 map 11).

6. Finds

Finds List

Artefact	Context	Description	Amount	Weight in grams	Kept/Disc.
Possible Hob nail fragment	1001	Rusty flattened head of sub-circular degraded and broken nail (13mm diameter x 5mm thick) with 3mm long compressed and broken shank visible on underside. Probable hobnail. Roman? (Fig. 11)	1	<1g	Kept
Hob nail	1001	Rusty oval plano-convex head (9mm x 6mm) with 5mm long thin pointed shank that is sub rectangular in cross section and broken at the distal end. Hobnail. Roman. (Fig. 11)	1	<1g	Kept

The excavation archive and artefacts (hobnails) will be deposited at Ceredigion Museum, Aberystwyth.

7. Acknowledgements

Archaeology Wales and Trsigell Ltd would like to thank the Jenkins family of Ynysforgan for allowing the excavation on their land. Many thanks also to S4C, Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales, Dyfed Archaeological Trust, Dr Toby Driver and Dr Jeff Davies. Thanks to all the excavation team that included Jerry Bond, Dr Erika Guttman-Bond (University of Wales Trinity St Davids), Dr Amelia Pannett, Debbie Richards, Andrew Teilo and Dilys Jones.

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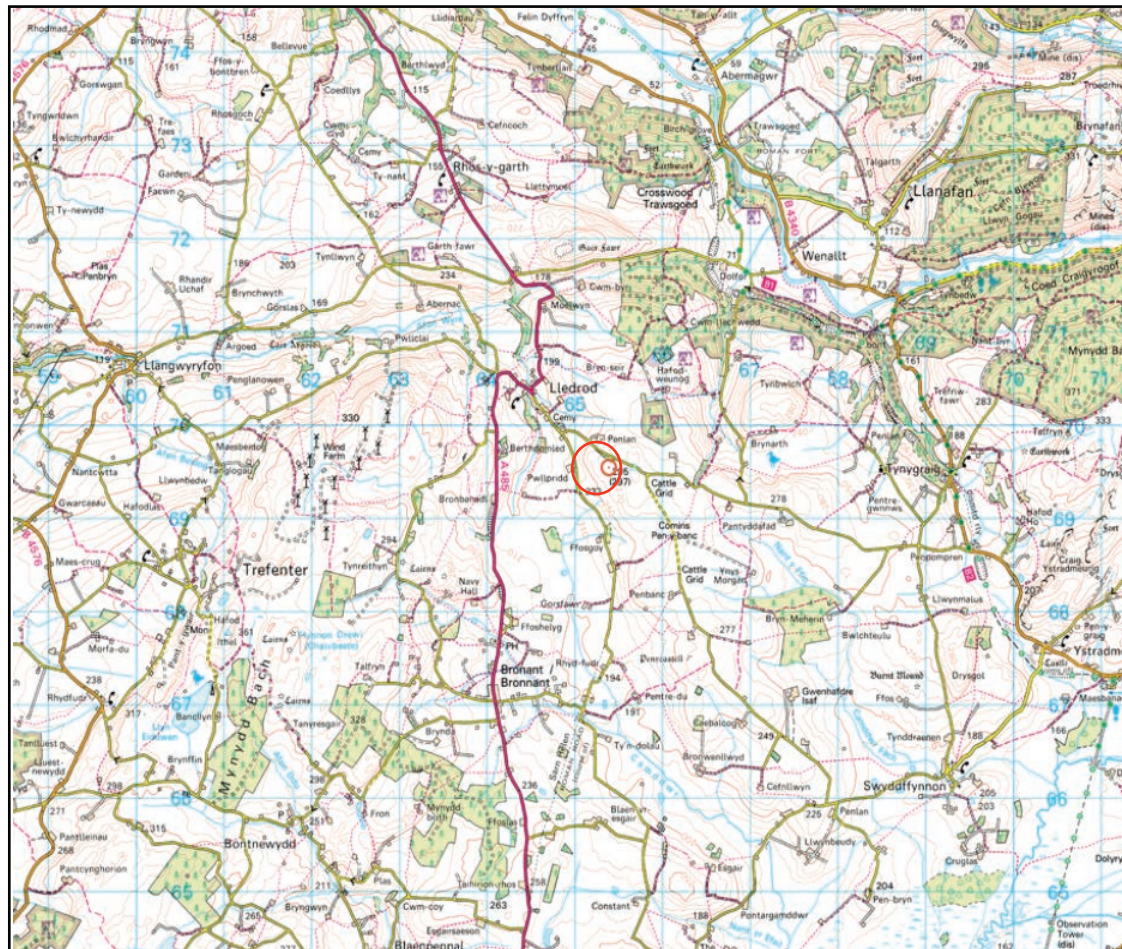
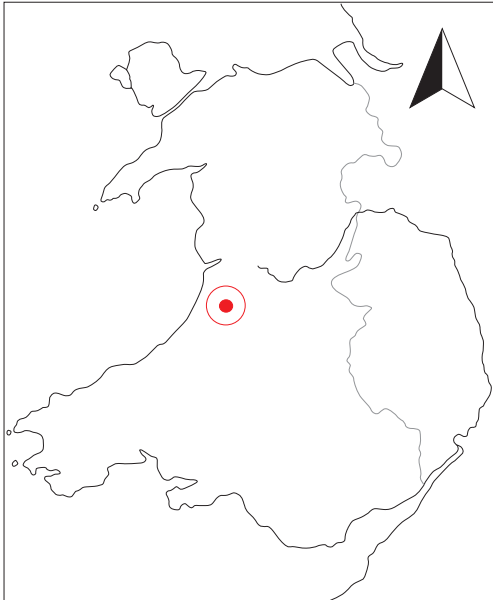
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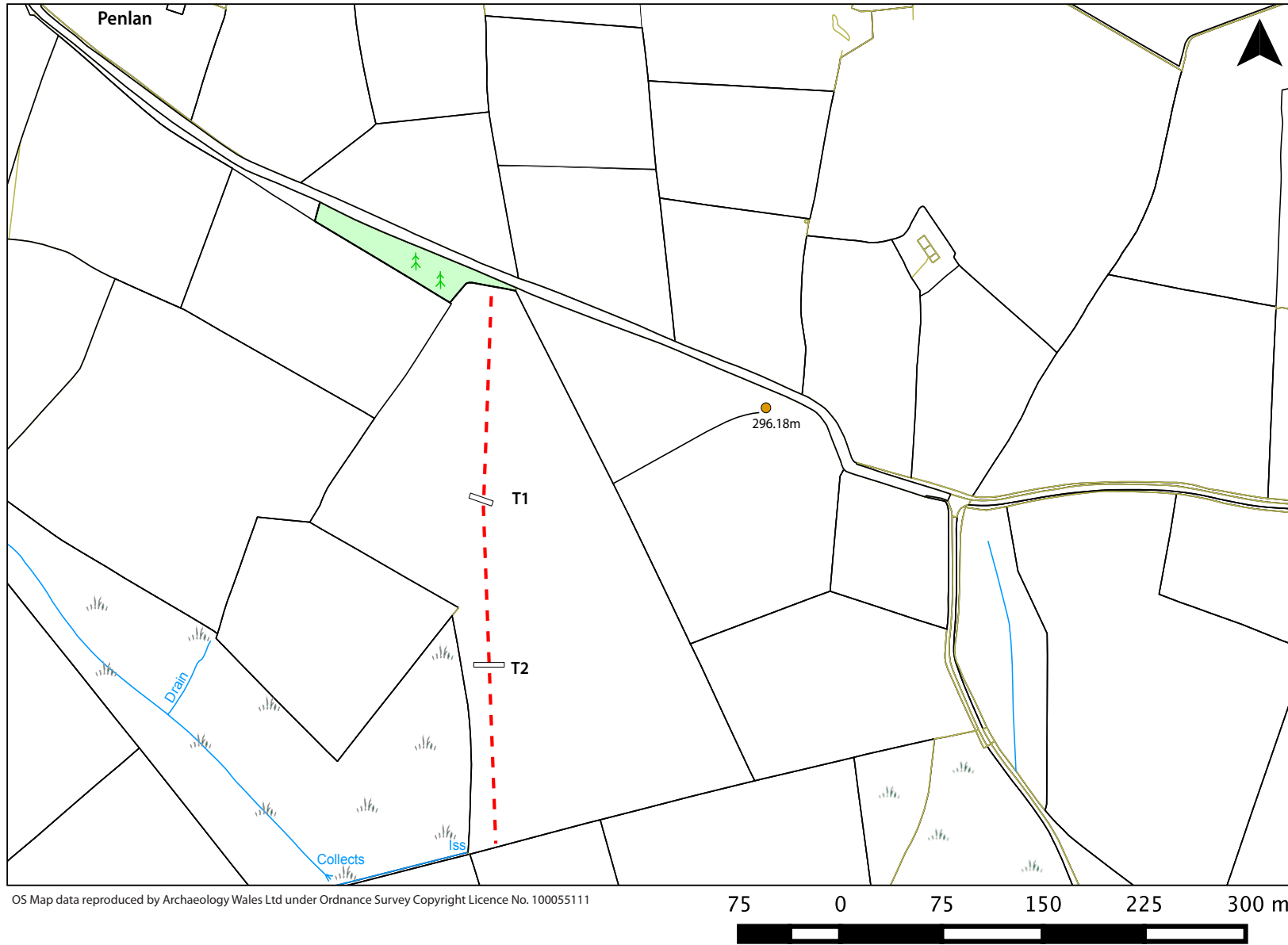
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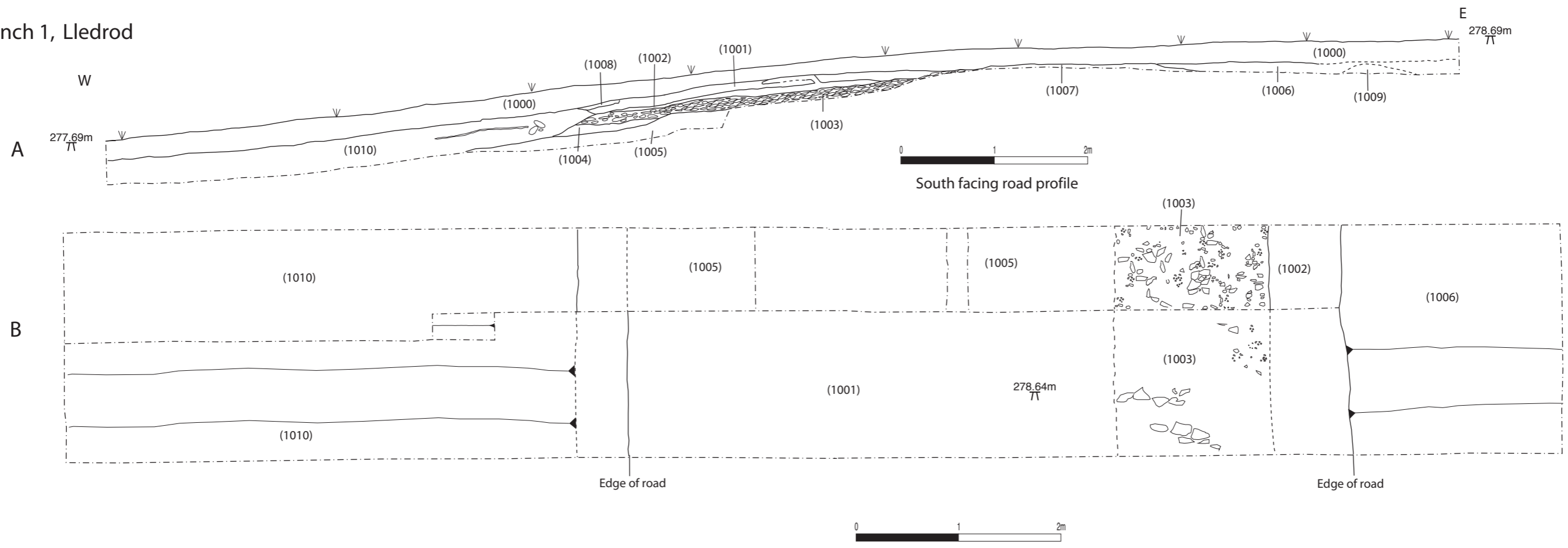
Fig. 1
Site location



--- Suggested line of Road

Fig. 2
Trench locations and suggested line of road

Trench 1, Lledrod



Trench 2, Lledrod

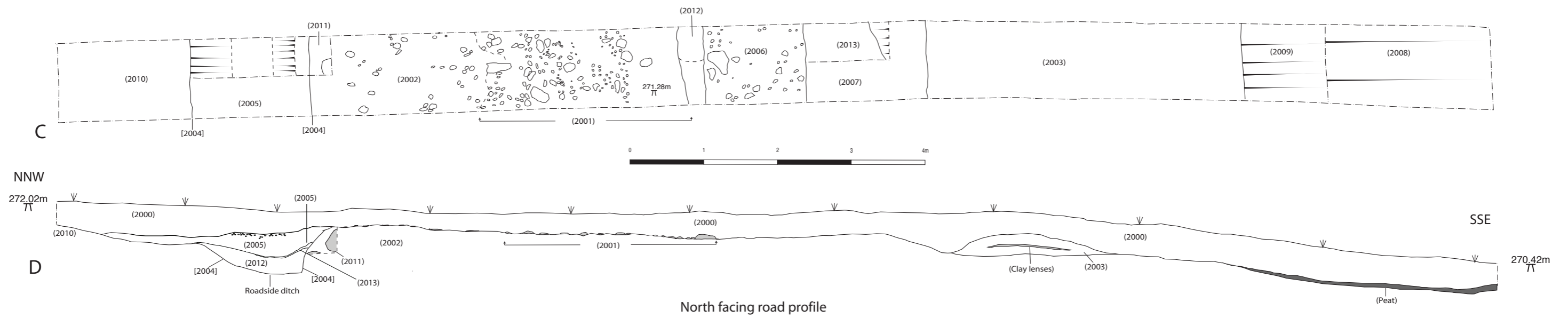


Fig. 3 Plans and sections of Trenches 1 and 2, Lledrod



Trench 1: Mid excavation (looking west: scale 2m)

Fig. 4

Trench 1: view of road from the eastern side



Trench 1: Mid excavation (looking west: scale 2m and 1m)

Fig. 5

Trench 1: elevated view of road from the eastern side



Trench 1: Mid excavation (looking south: scales 2m)

Fig. 6

Trench 1: elevated view of road from the northern side



Trench 1: West facing section through edge of road (scales 0.5m, 2m)

Fig. 7

Trench 1:
Excavated agger
surface



a. Post excavation image of agger surface (looking north)



b. South facing section through road (looking north-east)

Trench 1: Post excavation images (scales 0.5m, 1m, 2m)

Fig. 8
Trench 1 images



a. Looking west across the road towards marshy ground



b. Looking east with peaty deposit in foreground

Trench 2: Mid excavation images (scales 1m, 2m)

Fig. 9
Trench 2 images



a. Slot excavated through eastern roadside ditch
(looking south-west)



b. Slot excavated through eastern roadside ditch
(looking west-southwest)

Fig.10

Trench 2: images of
partly excavated
roadside ditch



Probable hobnails

Fig. 11

Hobnails found on
road agger surface

Archaeology Wales



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