

CPAT Report No 1107

Pen-y-gaer Roman Vicus, Cwmdu, Powys: Draft Interim Report

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION



THE CLWYD-POWYS ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

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Draft Interim Report**

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION

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Report for Llangynidr Local History Society and Cadw

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1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

- 1.1 Pen-y-gaer Roman fort (Fig. 1; SO 168 219) stands on a small knoll about 2km to the east of a pass between Buckland Hill and the Cefn Moel ridge, now occupied by the village of Bwlch in what was Brecknock but is now southern Powys. It lies approximately half way along the Roman route linking the larger forts at Brecon and Abergavenny.
- 1.2 The presence of a Roman fort here was probably first noted by the Wiltshire antiquary, Sir Richard Colt Hoare in 1803 (Thompson 1983, 238) and was referenced to by his local contemporary and fellow traveller, Theophilus Jones (1805-9, 499). Colt Hoare recognised the foundations of buildings in the surrounding fields and noted the occurrence of large quantities of brick and tile. The authenticity of the fort was confirmed by excavations in 1966 (Nash-Williams and Jarrett 1969, 108-110) which apparently revealed three phases of occupation dating from 80-130 AD. The writers considered the abandonment of the fort to date to the reign of Hadrian, although the results of later work imply occupation from both slightly earlier and later periods (Burnham and Davies 2010, 276).

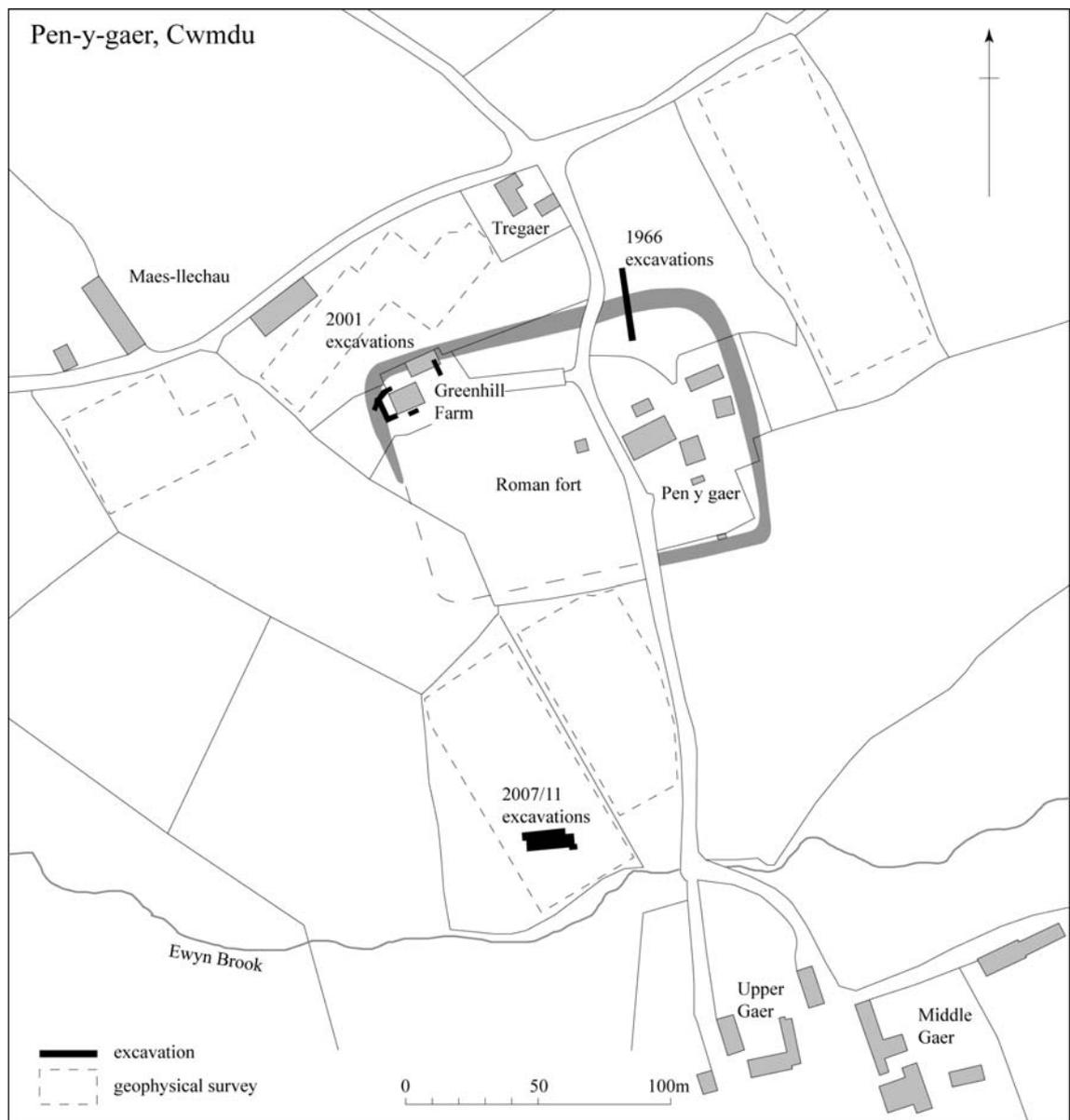


Fig.1: Location of the fort, together with the excavations and areas of geophysical survey

- 1.3 In more recent times, some work has been carried out within the area of the fort and its environs, primarily in response to access construction and small-scale development at Greenhill Farm, lying in the north-west corner of the fort. The most significant investigations occurred in 2001, when an evaluation there revealed traces of timber buildings within the fort and a pottery assemblage. The only other relevant work involved excavations carried out by CPAT in 1997 on the potential site of the bath-house, some 200m to the west-north-west of the fort, although the results of this work were inconclusive.
- 1.4 Renewed interest in the site came with the completion by CPAT in 2006 of a programme of geophysical survey in the area surrounding the fort (see Fig. 1), with funding from Cadw. This identified an area in the field to the south of the fort which appeared to be of some archaeological potential, and included a possible building (Fig. 2; SO 16849 21796).

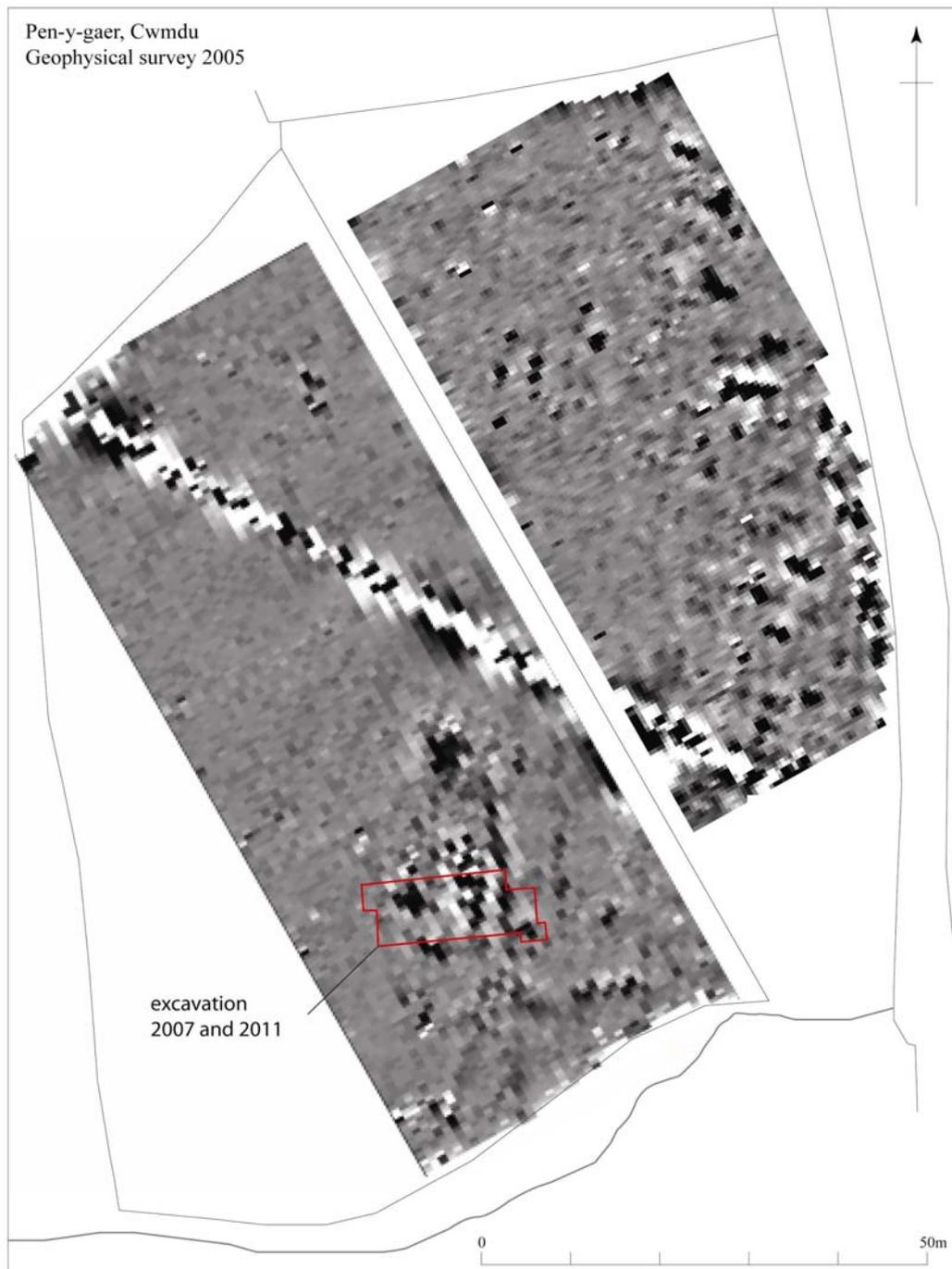


Fig. 2: Geophysics results from the field to the south of the fort

- 1.5 An excavation in 2007 was fairly limited in nature, comprising a single trench positioned to investigate the building identified by the geophysical survey. The results confirmed the existence of stone walls associated with one or more buildings, together with a spread of roofing tile from a possible lean-to structure. A spread of smithing waste revealed industrial activity in this area.
- 1.6 This report presents a summary of a second phase of excavation, conducted in May 2011, which investigated further the buildings identified in 2007. This involved the partial re-excavation of the original excavation, together with a broadening of the excavation area to the south.
- 1.7 The 2011 excavation was undertaken by volunteers from the Llangynidr Local History Society (LLHS), based on the opposite side of the river to Pen-y-gaer, under the direction of CPAT. Funding, provided by The Beacons Trust, was arranged by Mrs Jan Bailey of LLHS, and Cadw gave an additional grant. The excavation offered an opportunity for the volunteers both to enhance their excavation experience, and to increase their knowledge of the archaeology of their Usk Valley locality.

2 EXCAVATION

- 2.1 The 2011 excavation investigated an area measuring around 17.9m east/west by 5.0m north/south, with a small extension at its south-east corner (Figs 3-4). This had been carefully positioned to include part of the 2007 excavation along the northern side in order to allow the integration of the earlier results. The topsoil was carefully removed by machine, with all subsequent excavation and cleaning carried out by hand. The numbers in brackets in the following text refer to individual contexts recorded in the combined site archives for the two excavations.



Fig. 3: The 2011 excavation viewed from the east. Photo CPAT 3295-0194

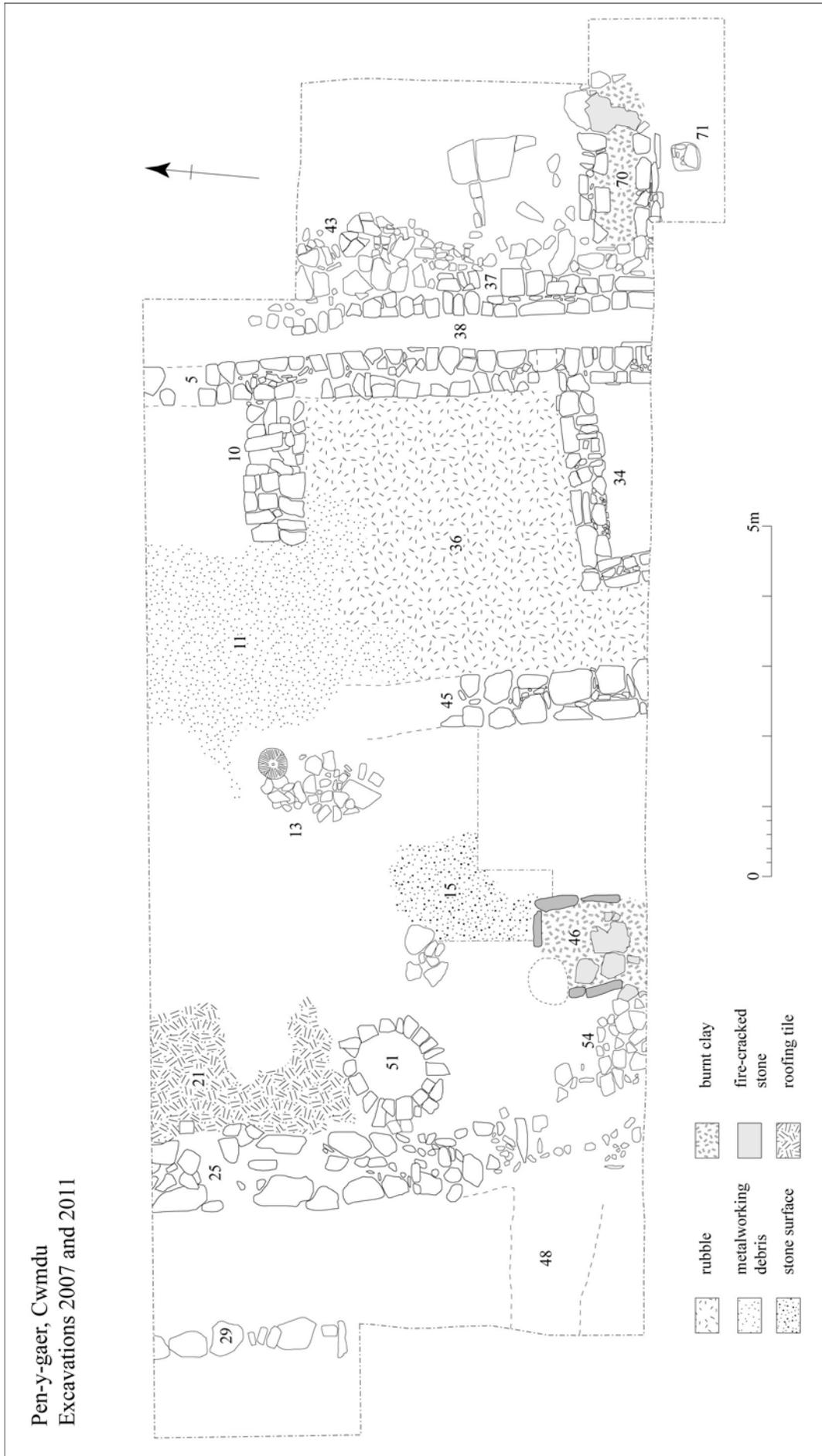


Fig. 4: Composite plan of the 2007 and 2011 excavations

- 2.2 The excavation revealed a sequence of buildings and other structures which are dealt with individually below. It seems likely that the earliest building (58) is represented by two parallel walls (25 and 45), respectively 1.1m and 0.8m in width, aligned roughly north/south and 5.8m apart, with both ends beyond the limits of excavation. The walls were of similar, un-mortared construction, utilising large boulders with small packing stones in between. Only the basal courses of stone survived and both walls were incomplete, having been partly robbed as well as having some stones displaced by the plough. The presence of a further structure to the west of the building is suggested by a possible robber trench (48), running out at right angles from (25) which may indicate the position of a wall, and the base of a relatively insubstantial wall (29) composed of a single alignment of stones.
- 2.3 Within the building there was a worn pebble surface (15) and a hearth (46) which may be contemporary (Fig. 5). The hearth, which measured 1.45m across, was surrounded by edge-set stones and within these were the remnants of a flagstone surface which had been cracked by the heat. An area of possible stone paving to the west (54) was also partially heat-affected.



Fig. 5: The hearth (46) and adjoining paved area (54), also showing part of floor layer (15), viewed from the east. Photo CPAT 3295-0186

- 2.4 Also within the building, although without any stratigraphic relationship to confirm an association, was a small, stone-lined well (Fig. 6). This was sub-circular in plan and measured up to 1.0m in diameter internally. Only the upper 0.5m of fill was removed, consisting of voided rubble, sufficient to confirm the nature of the feature. A spread of roof tiles (21) lay immediately to the north of the well perhaps associated with a lean-to structure, while an area of stone (13) to the east, from which part of a rotary quern was recovered in 2007, may indicate the position of a rubble-filled pit.



Fig. 6: The well (51) and area of roof tile (21) on the east side of wall (25), viewed from the north. Photo CPAT 3295-0138



Fig. 7: The room in building (59) defined by wall (34), viewed from the west. Photo CPAT 3295-0121

- 2.5 A second building (59) was identified less than 0.5m to the east of the rubble-walled building (58), and respecting its position and alignment, such that the two may have been standing at the same time. This had been built of higher quality masonry, using sandstone slabs to construct walls that were faced on either side, and had rubble infill. Again the walls were unmortared.
- 2.6 The form of the building is uncertain as it extended beyond the excavated area to the north and south. The eastern side was formed by a wall (5) around 0.7m thick, three courses of which survived to a height of around 0.4m above the stepped foundation, which itself extended for at least a further 0.2m in depth. Tied in to this wall, on its western side, was a further wall (34) of similar construction which defined part of a room with an internal measurement of 2.5m east/west. Around 3.6m to the north were the remains of another wall (10). This was discontinuous and did not appear to be tied in to the eastern wall. Possibly it may be a later addition. It is possible that the building was in part open-fronted, with two enclosed rooms and an open-sided yard in between. Alternatively, the eastern wall may have been a boundary wall with a contemporary building (34) at the southern end and the other wall (10) forming part of a lean-to structure.
- 2.7 This area contained a significant quantity of rubble (36) from the demolition or collapse of the building, although interestingly little roofing material was encountered. The majority of the rubble was left in situ, with excavation restricted to confirming the relationship between this layer and a deposit of industrial waste (11), comprising smithing slag, fragments of hearth base, hammer-scale and anthracite. The nature of the deposit indicates that part of the area was occupied by a smithy which used coal as its source of fuel. Wall (10) appeared to have been constructed on top of the waste material, confirming its later origin.
- 2.8 The industrial waste did not extend into the earlier building (58), to the west of wall (45), although some of the material may have been spread across the line of the wall when stones were removed from it at a later date. Indeed, it seems likely that both buildings (58 and 59) were still standing when the smithy was in operation, the waste material being sealed beneath rubble from the collapse of the eastern structure (59).
- 2.9 A drain (38) lay immediately to the east of wall (5) and this appears to be the same as a feature revealed by the geophysical survey, extending for around 16m north of the excavation and a further 22m to the south, presumably ending at the stream. Only limited excavations were undertaken to investigate the drain, which indicated that it was at least 0.55m deep, with the lower fill including a significant quantity of smithing waste (68), similar to the deposit (11) identified on the western side of the wall. Interestingly, the external face of the wall had been reinforced throughout by the later addition of a line of edge-set stones (65), which included a single Roman tile. The wall also incorporated a culvert (56) which fed into the drain from the area to the north of wall (34).
- 2.10 To the east of the drain, in the south-east corner of the excavation, were the remains of what appears to have been a small corn-drying kiln (70). The flue consisted of two parallel walls with a surviving length of 1.8m and set 0.4m apart, aligned east/west. At the eastern end there were the remains a floor formed by stone slabs, some of which were heavily fire-cracked, although at this stage it is uncertain whether this was the drying chamber or the stokehole. Only the very base of the structure survived, although a post-hole (71) immediately to the south may have been associated with some form of wooden superstructure. It may be significant that one of the upper fills (66) of the drain (38) contained burnt material which could have originated from the kiln. However, given the close proximity of the drain to the western end of the flue it is perhaps unlikely that the two features were in contemporary use; the kiln is likely to be the earlier feature.



Fig. 8: The drain (38) viewed from the north with wall (5) to the west and wall (37) to the east, showing the area of collapse. Photo CPAT 3295-0102



Fig. 9: The probable corn-drying kiln (70), viewed from the east. Photo CPAT 3295-0167

- 2.11 Over time the drain had evidently fallen out of use. It became completely infilled, and then its eastern side was sealed beneath a masonry wall (37) which ran parallel to wall (10) and was of similar construction, perhaps representing part of a further building (60). Within the excavated area the northern part of this wall had clearly subsided into the drain, leading to its collapse (Fig. 9).

3 THE FINDS

At the time of writing the finds from the excavation are still being processed at Llangynidr. It is intended to update this report as and when the material is catalogues and studied.

4 CONCLUSIONS

- 4.1 The recent work, both in 2007 and 2011, has added significantly to our understanding of extramural activity surrounding the fort at Pen-y-gaer. The results from geophysical survey and two sessions of excavation have provided clear evidence for activity on the south side of the fort, representing part of a civilian settlement or *vicus*. The excavations have identified at least three masonry structures, each of which may be associated with a separate phase of activity. Although the nature and extent of the buildings remains uncertain, it is clear that there was significant industrial activity, in the form of iron smithing, somewhere close by.
- 4.2 Despite the close proximity of the surviving remains to the present ground surface, the preservation is generally good, although some plough scarring was evident where structures approached the surface and traces of stone robbing were also noted. The depth of the Roman deposits remains to be confirmed since the approach adopted by the excavation was largely non-intrusive.
- 4.3 A number of further approaches may elucidate the nature and extent of the *vicus* in this area. With regard to the structures revealed during the excavations, the geophysics provides an indication of the extent of activity in this area, but the limits of the buildings have yet to be determined. The nature of the buildings also remains uncertain and while the presence of a hearth within the earlier building might suggest domestic use, the later structures may have had a more industrial function. Indeed, it is not clear whether the other structures were individual, free-standing buildings, or were part of a complex that could have included a number of small buildings, perhaps workshops, associated within a walled enclosure. It would also be useful, too, to define the linear extent of the drain (38), particularly to the south, as this may assist with understanding the course of the nearby stream in the Roman period. A section across the drain to define its original profile and the nature of its fills would probably provide useful information.
- 4.4 Although the positive geophysical anomalies have focused attention in one particular area to the south of the fort, this is not to say that other areas were devoid of activity. In particular, given that the known structures lie at a distance of around 100m from the fort it seems likely that the intervening area may also have been occupied. Perhaps this did not include the substantial structures and industrial activity which produced such a marked response with the geophysics, but we have seen in recent years at Brecon Gaer how geophysical results can vary fundamentally from one part of a site to another.
- 4.5 Where *vicus* activity has been identified elsewhere in mid-Wales, as for example at Brecon Gaer and Caersws, this has tended to focus along one or more of the roads emanating from the fort. Although the line of the *via principalis*, leading south from the fort, has yet to be

confirmed it is believed to underlie the modern road and the area between this and the recent excavations is somewhere where further trial excavation might be illuminating.

- 4.6 It is intended to conduct a programme of full post-excavation and publication in due course.

5 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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- 5.2 Particular thanks are due to the current landowner, Mr P Morris, for his interest and support, and to the landowners at the time of the previous excavation in 2007, Mr and Mrs James.

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