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Hen Caerwys Community Excavation, Caerwys, Flintshire

The Fourth Season

Excavation



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Introduction

The background story of Hen Caerwys, hidden away in woodland on the limestone plateau of Flintshire, features both an absorbing archaeological site and an arresting landscape that has previously attracted the attention of several interesting individuals. It has been discussed by us elsewhere, briefly in the several interim reports from past years (Silvester and Davies 2011; 2012; Silvester, Davies and Pudney 2013) and in considerably more detail in successive entries in the web-based project diary that we maintained for most of the period between August 2011 and June 2012, and which at the time of writing is still accessible on the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust website, and which we have now converted into an article that should appear in the *Transactions of the Flintshire Historical Society* in the next six months (Davies and Silvester: forthcoming).

It is sufficient to note here that the complex that we know as Hen Caerwys, a rural site of medieval date (SJ 1386 7421) was discovered at a date prior to 1960, and was partially excavated by the Flintshire Historical Society between 1962 and 1968 when two house platforms were examined. That work was never properly published by the excavators and for many years anyone interested in the work was wholly reliant on brief notes in various journals, until the late 1970s when a Mr Tom Rogers, who had not been personally involved in the original excavations, published what had been uncovered on one of the house platforms during the previous decade. In the same year the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments in the Welsh Office (the precursor of today's Cadw) scheduled much of the complex, this coinciding (perhaps not accidentally) with abortive plans by Rogers to survey and excavate the site on a major scale.

Not until 1993 was a full survey made of the complex, hardly surprising in view of the fact that virtually all of it was covered by vegetation that must have deterred all but the most resilient and thick-skinned of investigators. Commissioned by Cadw and undertaken by the Gwynedd Archaeological Trust at the instigation of the now defunct Clwyd Archaeology Service, the plan has remained our sole guide to the extent and layout of the earthworks at Hen Caerwys and GAT's achievement in producing it, in conjunction with the landowner, is a constant source of amazement to us when working on site. In 2013 the survey was redrawn at the instigation of Cadw, and this new draft now forms the basis of our Fig. 1.

It was against this background of a site which when first excavated in the 1960s was lauded as the first known, abandoned nucleated medieval settlement in north-east Wales (and is still virtually the only one known) 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 success of that trial project led to a further seasons of work in 2012 and 2013, and now 2104, the last of these forming the subject of the interim report presented here.

The Site

It is not proposed to describe in any detail here the complex of earthworks that make up Hen Caerwys. Briefly, the site lies within several contiguous tracts of mature broadleaved woodland and two adjacent pasture fields, a total area of nearly 12 hectares. The house platforms lie in two discrete groups, both set into south-facing natural scarps and on the

plateau above are a number of stone-banked enclosures and fields, and some trackways that present an irregular appearance. Even if not of two or more phases these earthworks suggest a rather haphazard aggregation of new elements to an existing core. Perhaps later (though there are divergent views on this) is a substantial embanked rectangular enclosure which appears to overlie a bank of the field/enclosure system. Because of their proximity, this could be contemporary with (or at least in contemporary use with) another near square enclosure which contains the low foundations of a house (now recognised as an encroachment cottage) together with a platform set at right angles to it. These suggest a discrete complex set across the earlier fields and enclosures of the more nucleated settlement represented by the house platforms. A second similar cottage complex lies just to the south.

The site is completed by other features that have yet to be fully understood. Further north in the generally inaccessible woodlands and also in the pasture, are 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. What was originally thought to be a very ruined limekiln is located in the western corner of the wood and immediately south of the road that bisects the site.

The Excavations

This season's excavations continued the examination of three trenches and opened a number of test pits. These together with previous trenches are listed as:

Trench A. Across the bank of the large rectangular enclosure. Opened in 2011, completed in 2012.

Trench B. Placed at the lower end of what was anticipated to be the second platform examined by the Flintshire Historical Society in the mid-1960s. Opened in 2011, completed in 2012.

Trench C. Placed across the lower end of the encroachment cottage and onto the adjacent platform. Opened in 2012, completed in 2013.

Trench D. Test pit near Trench C to establish the depth of soil deposits over the natural limestone. Opened and completed in 2012.

Trench E. Across part of the platform in the western group of buildings. Opened in 2013, continued in 2014 and covered over for completion in 2015.

Trench F. Across a field bank where it intersects with the rectangular enclosure bank. Opened in 2013, continued in 2014 and covered over for completion in 2015.

Trench G. Test pit to establish the depth of soil deposits over the natural limestone within the large rectangular enclosure. Also used for a University of Bournemouth experiment. Opened and completed in 2013.

Trench H. Across part of a longitudinal platform in the western group of buildings. Opened in 2013 and completed in 2014.

Trench J. Test pit – one of three – to west of Trench E.

Trench K. Test pit – one of three – to west of Trench E and also west of Trench J.

Trench L. Test pit – to east of Trench E.

Trench M. Test pit - to east of Trench E and also east of Trench L.

Trench N. Test pit – one of three – to west of Trench E and to south of Trench J.

Trench O. Clearance of features set above and to the north of the house under examination in Trench E.

Trench P. Test pit – in large rectangular enclosure, towards northern side.

Trench Q. Test pit – in large rectangular enclosure, south of Trench P.

Trench R. Test pit – in large rectangular enclosure, south of Trench Q.

Trench S. Test pit – in large rectangular enclosure, south of Trench R.

Trench T. Test pit – in large rectangular enclosure, south of Trench S.

Trench U. Structure originally considered to be a limekiln, now perhaps an ice-house. Clearance.

Trench V. Test pit – in large rectangular enclosure, south of Trench T.



Fig 1. Plan of the Hen Caerwys earthworks (in green) showing the locations of the major trenches (in red). Because of their small sizes trenches J to V have not been depicted.
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Trench E

Trench E was initially opened in 2013 within one of the second and apparently undisturbed group of platform structures in the south-western corner of Coed Gerdd-gleision. It was intended to retrieve comparative structural, cultural and dating evidence for the apparently late medieval and early post-medieval structures that had first been investigated by the Flintshire Historical Society in the 1960s. Most of the 2013 season was spent carefully removing limestone

rubble associated with the collapse of the long walls of the building, the excavations being halted on top of the first convincing surface which comprised a compact, orange clay flecked with charcoal and burnt limestone and with a discrete central oval area of burnt clay and charcoal disappearing off the edge of the excavation to the north. This deposit was only present in the northern half of the trench and was tentatively interpreted as the remains of a floor, its southern edge seemingly defined by a ridge in the bedrock with two small central, rock-cut stake-holes. South of this line the rubble collapse of the walls directly overlay the bedrock.

In order to explore the possible floor surface and burnt central feature further and to gain a fuller understanding of the layout of the structure, Trench E was extended 4m to the north during this season's programme, covering approximately two-thirds of the building to the projected outer faces of its walls. The northern limit of the trench lay at least 2m from the presumably rock-cut uphill fan of the platform, primarily owing to the safety implications for volunteers working below deep and potentially unstable rubble deposits but also because it was not felt that such a volume of rubble could be removed in the time available with many large roots impeding progress.

The extension was excavated stratigraphically to the level reached in 2013. The densely packed nature of the limestone rubble and the possibility that occupation surfaces might be encountered at a higher level at the upper end of the platform - as seems to have been the case in House I of the 1960s excavations - dictated that progress was slow. Following the removal of surface vegetation and the upper humic layer, a pair of very large stones were distinguished, both firmly set on end within the rubble, alongside if not immediately adjacent to the eastern wall. The superficially structural appearance of the pair dictated that they were left in situ until their function had been ascertained.



Fig 2. Trench E extended to take in most of the house including the long side walls. The quarry (Trench O) lies above the platform, to the right of centre top in the photograph. Photo: CPAT 3848-0168

The upper contexts corresponded closely to those excavated in 2013 and consisted of successive layers of increasingly dense limestone debris and dark, organic rich soil, tipping into the interior of the building from the higher levels of the walls to the east, the upper end of the platform to the north and to a lesser degree the western wall. A range of later post-medieval finds were retrieved from the rubble, mostly from the eastern side of the building including a decoy chicken egg and a number of pieces of 18th- and 19th-century pottery. The lower rubble layer was set in a lighter brown soil and rested on two distinct contexts. The lower of these extended over much of the interior of the building and comprised a dense, clay-rich, orange-brown surface with some very small flecks of charcoal; on top of and possibly within this were several irregular areas of a stiff, dark grey-brown, silty clay containing smaller stones, charcoal flecks, pockets of burnt clay and possibly daub, these deposits being darker in colour but similar in texture to the surface reached in 2013. This layer also produced a quantity of small animal bones and crucially, a few diagnostic shards of later medieval pottery similar to those described from the 1960s excavations by Leach and Pennant Williams.

Against the inner faces of the walls and below the rubble deposits were several discrete fans of a lighter brown, clay-rich soil almost identical to contexts recorded in 2013 and likely to represent bonding material washed from the walls as a primary process of decay. These overlay the denser lower clay surface but not the areas of darker material, which were mostly located down the centre of the structure, prompting their provisional interpretation as lenses of silted occupation debris washed from their initial places of deposition into a series of shallow central hollows following the abandonment of the building. The alternative possibility that this material represents the remnants of a floor seems less likely as no traces were identified at the sides of the room and under the primary clay wash from the walls where such a surface might be expected to survive.

It was established that the pair of large stones exposed during the initial clearance of the house near the east wall lay are likely to have fallen from the upper levels of the wall rather than serving any structural purpose. Both lay within the lower rubble deposits, the larger and more southerly on the upper surface of the dark brown clay, the other having clearly fallen and lodged against it. The possibility that the larger stone formed part of a crude later partition within the ruined structure cannot be entirely dismissed; most of the later finds in the rubble came from the area immediately to the north of it. The stones were recorded in detail and then removed, enabling the whole trench to be cleaned onto the clay surfaces.

The inner faces of the walls themselves were preserved on both sides of the trench and consisted of uncoursed blocks of random size and shape. The northern part of the east wall rested on a foundation of flat slabs set into the lower clay surface, the west wall apparently being based directly upon the clay. A small 2m by 1m sondage was opened on the projected outer face of the western wall, parallel with the north-west corner of the trench in order to establish its width and relationship to the cutting of the uphill end of the platform. The outer face of the wall was not identified and would appear either not to have existed or to have survived only below the level to which the sondage was excavated (approximately 0.3m below the external ground surface), the clay cutting of the platform against which the wall was set being clearly defined in section.

Whilst some comparative ceramic dating evidence has been retrieved it is notable that in stark contrast to the plans produced by the Flintshire Historical Society, no internal structural elements such as post-holes have so far been identified within the building, with the exception of the possible rock-cut stake-holes forming part of a putative east-west partition exposed in 2013. However, these are too slight in themselves to have served as load-bearing timbers for a roof and more substantial posts might be expected to have existed, either alongside the walls or

supporting a central ridge. With this in mind and with the clay surfaces cleaned to the same level as that exposed during 2013, the decision was again made to stop work with three days to spare in order to avoid leaving these significant contexts unsatisfactorily excavated or failing to identify the potentially ephemeral traces of posts, partitions and other internal features. The trench has been covered and partially backfilled in the event that funding is available for a final season in 2014/5.

Trench F

Trench F was initially opened in 2013 to investigate the intersection between the corner of the main enclosure bank and a linear bank running roughly north to south. In 2013 we were able to establish the construction method of the north/south linear bank and revealed the outer edge of the main enclosure. It appeared that the north/south linear bank was of an earlier date than the enclosure, although no firm dating material had been found that could place either of these features within some sort of time period. In 2014 we therefore returned to Trench F, expanding the trench in order to a) reveal and investigate the full width of the enclosure bank in this area and, b) see if we could recover any material which might help us date these two features.



Fig. 3. Trench F with the wall facing slabs to the left of the ranging rod.
Photo: CPAT 3848-0123

An area of 10m by 4m was opened, incorporating the 2013 trench. Rubble limestone layers continued to fill the trench and were methodically peeled away to reveal the inner face of the main enclosure. The profile of a bank, as it had appeared from the surface, was in fact a considerable wall-like structure, which had collapsed. The nature of the collapse had left the misleading humped profile which, on the ground, we had previously interpreted as a bank. In this part of the enclosure the outer face was made up of the upright slabs that we had

revealed the previous year. The inner face survived as at least two, and in places three, roughly hewn, irregular courses of limestone. The core was made up of a mix of large and medium rubble within a sandy-soil matrix.

Based upon the tip lines of the collapse, which were visible in section, the structure originally would have had at least a further four or five courses on top of this, perhaps standing to a height of up to two metres. With a width of c. 1.80 metres this would have been a significant feature. The tip lines were also indicative of a structure that had collapsed largely in one event, with the western side of the corner collapsing mostly outwards and the eastern part, collapsing inwards, into the enclosure, almost pivoting on the corner point.

The rubble core and inner face of the wall produced a considerable quantity of animal bone but not much else. No ceramics have been recovered from Trench F. Further investigation of the north/south linear bank produced several pieces of worked flint, including a fragment of a serrated blade, suggesting that this feature sits well within prehistory. The construction of the enclosure firmly overlies this earlier bank but placing this within a specific period is, for the time being, not possible. It is clear from the depth of the accumulations overlying the collapsed material indicates that the enclosure structure had been in a state of collapse for some time. Added to this, some of the upper layers of the collapsed material also showed signs of weathering, in that the limestone blocks were much smoother than those in the layers beneath. Some metal finds and slag were produced from the collapse layers as well as from the accumulation/dump material beneath this which was abutting the structure itself. Depending on the type and metallurgy of these objects we should be able to gain an approximate date for the collapse of the structure although at the time of writing this analysis has not yet been undertaken. The animal bone is therefore crucial in providing any indication of a date for the construction of main enclosure itself. As such it was considered that samples should be set aside for radiocarbon dating. Once these have been obtained we will hopefully be situated in a much better position to interpret this part of the site.

As with the date of this structure, the function of the enclosure is currently uncertain. The flint indicates a possible Bronze Age date for the north/south linear bank. If we are to consider a later prehistoric date for the enclosure then we could be looking at an Iron Age defended enclosure, the construction of which is not too dissimilar to the enclosure at Din Lligwy on Anglesey or Moel-y-Gaer, Bodfari and near to Caerwys where an even more substantial wall was recently uncovered at the hillfort (Gary Lock: *pers. comm.*). If, however, we are looking at something much later and perhaps contemporary with either the platform houses or the cottage in the adjacent enclosure then its function could serve as some sort of stock enclosure. As yet no occupation evidence has been identified within the enclosure.

We were unable to reveal the original ground surface of the enclosure or any layers which may lie beneath the enclosure structure this year owing to time constraints. Other than the questionable date for this feature, the questions that remain unanswered concern the nature of the exact relationship between the north/south linear bank and the enclosure – was the former deliberately cut into to build the latter and then cleared within the enclosure? How were the two features physically joined together? Is there any indication of post-holes or features on the inside edge of the enclosure which may help us establish its function? The trench has been partially covered over and we hope to continue work on it next year and answer these questions.

Trench H

Trench H was located at the eastern end of a platform set across the slope rather than down it, and was situated in the middle of the more westerly group of platforms. The trench, orientated from north to south, was initially opened at the 2013 excavations when only the humic topsoil was removed and the exposed limestone rubble cleaned up. This year's excavations continued the investigation in the anticipation of gleaning some information regarding the function and date of the building.

The trench, measuring 2.6m wide and 4.3m long, partially revealed a limestone boulder wall, running east/west at the southern limit of the platform. A north/south extension was excavated in the south-eastern corner of the trench, over the wall, to establish its width and character. Just over 1m in width, what remained were two courses of limestone rubble boulders that also incorporated a mudstone boulder, and a rubble core. The northern wall of the putative building or structure was not picked up in the trench and presumably survives further into the slope. The original height of the wall(s) remains completely unknown.



Fig 4. Trench H after excavation, seen from the south
Photo: CPAT 3848-0129

The excavation within the platform was not particularly informative and it was not possible to establish a function or date for the building. The trench appeared devoid of any deposits relating to occupation or other activities, and was virtually sterile in terms of artefacts, save for a couple of late post-medieval pot sherds recovered from high in the collapsed limestone rubble.

It seems that the natural limestone pavement was utilised as the platform for the building; it appeared that irregularities and voids in the pavement, already relatively level, were packed with re-deposited subsoil and flatter rubble slabs were laid as levelling. The northern wall

appears to have been erected on top of this natural limestone surface. But evidence of activity within the structure or building had not survived and there were no deposits on the floor, no indications of roofing material, nor structural features such as post-holes.

After its abandonment the building remained exposed, allowing a silty humic layer to form at much the same time as the rubble walls collapsed; a later layer of rubble seemed to be sufficiently compacted as to suggest that it had been trampled, possibly by grazing stock, but this can only be speculative.

Trench J

This 1m by 1m test pit was located on open ground a few metres to the west of Trench E. At a depth of around 0.40m below the ground surface was a reasonably coherent though intermittent level of limestone rock fissured by crevices and with two distinctive rounded ovals, each around 150mm in diameter and filled with silt to a depth of 300mm or more. These were initially considered as post-holes, but after consultation with Dr Janet Smith, a local geologist, and our observations derived from adjacent test pits it was concluded that they were natural solution hollows. Above this horizon tightly packed limestone rubble randomly lying within gravelly silt was succeeded by decreasing amounts of limestone rubble blocks up to around 200mm long lying in a silty soil matrix. The uppermost material in the test pit was a humic and largely stoneless topsoil. No man-made features were uncovered in the test pit and no artefacts were recovered.

Trench K

This 1m by 1m test pit, immediately to the west of Trench J revealed large flattish slabs of limestone with narrow gravelly silt-filled interstices at a depth of around 350mm, similar to but not precisely the same as the limestone pavements uncovered elsewhere. The depth at which this natural limestone was encountered was very much the same – within 40mm – as that of the rims of the solution hollows in Trench J. Above this was a mixed layer of limestone rubble in a matrix of brown silt, and this was coated by humic topsoil. No man-made features were uncovered in the test pit and no artefacts were recovered.

Trench L

The 1m by 1m test pit lay immediately to the east of the house platform uncovered in Trench E, and after the completion of its examination it was extended westwards to the external wall face of the building, providing ultimately a section 2.2m long and termed for convenience the Trench L extension. The natural subsoil reached in the test pit here was a distinctive reddish-brown gravelly silt with occasional stone fragments embedded in it, and in one place a lens of reddish clay coating its surface. The gravelly silt was overcut but continued to go down further than the 200mm of excavation.

Above the natural subsoil was a mixed layer of angular limestone rubble and mid-brown silt, not entirely homogeneous in texture and probably a composite accumulation over time. Animal bone, shell and a small amount of pottery came from this layer which formed a wedge over 200mm thick in the test pit but then thinned rapidly towards the wall.

Large slabs of limestone lay immediately outside the wall of the building; there was no structure to them but the matrix in which they lay varied from gravelly sand near the wall face, perhaps from where it had washed out, to more humic pockets of soil. In contrast to the

angular limestone rubble layer noted above, there was virtually no artefactual material within this stony accumulation. Topsoil containing small stones and pervaded by rootlets covered all the deposits, lapping up to the wall face.

The interpretation of the sequence appears straightforward. The angular limestone rubble gradually accumulated before and perhaps during the lifetime of the settlement, integrating a small amount of discarded domestic debris, but the area immediately outside the house wall was kept clear and only after the abandonment of the building did it start to fill up with stone collapsing from the wall.

Trench M

The 1m by 1m test pit lay well to the east of the house platform and was divorced from Trench L by the Trench E spoil heap. The natural subsoil in the pit was a sandy silt, sometimes with a slight clayey feel to it, which incorporated limestone rubble and was removed to a depth of 160mm; a large block of stone in one corner, superficially suggesting a structure's presence, was found to be incidental. Above the subsoil, limestone rubble had accumulated in a silt matrix that became more gravelly at lower levels. A rich humic soil overlay the rubble. A small amount of animal bone was recovered from the rubble layer.

Trench N

The 1m by 1m test pit lay immediately to the south of Pit J and was designed primarily to see whether the 'post-holes' seen in that pit continued on an arc. Limestone bedrock was encountered at a depth of about 0.4m, though only across a part of the test pit, the rest of this horizon displaying a buff-brown sandy silt of unknown depth which presumably filled a gryke (a natural channel) in the bedrock. The limestone displayed several irregular solution concavities, reinforcing the view that those in Trench J were also natural. Above this was a rubble-rich layer of brown silt, the profile being completed by a standard humic topsoil. No man-made features were uncovered in the test pit and the only find was a piece of bone.

Trench O

Projecting from the top of the slope above the house platform in Trench E were several blocks of limestone that offered the vague impression of three sides of a structure, a view perhaps reinforced in our minds by the fact that GAT had mapped these during their survey of Hen Caerwys in 1993. The largest blocks on the west side stretched to a height of 0.66m above the ground surface, while a second but much less distinctive line of limestone was evident about 1.9m further east. At the rear (north) end one large slab emerged from the ground.

Leaving these blocks in situ, the excavation between them encountered only a humic soil containing small lumps of rock, the soil varying in depth between 150mm and 300mm; a couple of fragments of bone and one sherd of pottery were the only finds. Bedrock was exposed throughout the area cleared, forming a sloping 'floor' that was edged by the upright blocks of limestone on the west and north, both appearing as natural protrusions, and several straight edges to the natural limestone on the east, created by the organised removal of lumps of limestone.



Fig 5. The quarry in Trench O after excavation
Photo: CPAT 3848-0158

Rather than being the storage place for the house below which is what we had anticipated, this was clearly only a quarry, presumably where lumps of limestone had been levered out of a natural outcrop in order to erect the wall facings of the house. The large blocks of limestone on the surface were simply the residue of what had been a useful rock outcrop.

Trench P

This was the most northerly of a row of 1m by 1m test pits aligned from north to south along the short axis of the large rectangular enclosure. Natural bedrock was exposed with dark black-brown silt overlying it, which incorporated high levels of rooting. The soil was extremely shallow, generally less than 200mm. There were no finds from the test pit.

Trench Q

Lying to the south of Trench P, the 1m by 1m test pit again exposed natural limestone bedrock with dark black-brown silt overlying it. The soil was shallow, generally less than 300mm, and there were no finds from the test pit.

Trench R

Lying to the south of Trench Q, the 1m by 1m test pit again exposed natural limestone bedrock with dark brown silt overlying it. The soil was shallow, generally less than 250mm. Unexpectedly, a stone spindle whorl was recovered during the clearance of the matted vegetation that formed the top-most layer in the trench.

Trench S

Lying to the south of Trench R, the 1m by 1m test pit exposed natural limestone bedrock with dark brown silt overlying it. The soil was shallow, generally less than 400mm, and there were no finds from the test pit.

Trench T

Lying to the south of Trench S, the 1m by 1m test pit exposed natural limestone bedrock with dark black-brown silt overlying it. The soil was very shallow, generally less than 220mm, and one sherd of pottery was recovered from the test pit.

Trench V

Lying to the south of Trench T, the 1m by 1m test pit again exposed natural limestone bedrock with dark black-brown silt overlying it. The soil was shallow, generally less than 400mm, and there were no finds from the test pit.

These test pits (P to T and V) had a dual role. They provided information on how the soils in the large rectangular enclosure deepened from north to south, as suggested by previous work in 2011 and 2013. Not that this was as straightforward a picture as had been anticipated, for Trench T clearly showed that this was not a regular progression in depth down the site, and none of the trenches quite matched the depth of soil found in Trench G in 2013 towards the south-west corner of the enclosure, where 420mm of humic material was encountered.

The second purpose of the test pits was as a preliminary introduction to excavation for the primary school children from Caerwys on their organised day on site (see below). And it is probably fair to say that they thoroughly enjoyed the experience!



Fig 6. Caerwys School at work
Photo: CPAT 3849-0078

Site U

Trench U was located some 200m to the west of the main area of excavations, and was intended to investigate and characterise a circular limestone structure noted in previous years and tentatively identified as a possible limekiln.

The limestone structure was approximately 12.50m in diameter in plan overall. It consisted of a rubble wall which stood up to 3.00m above the modern ground surface; this wall was largely free-standing around its eastern, southern and western sides, but to the north it was either built into or abutted by an earthen bank. This bank curved around to the north east, and connected with a small quarry some 20m to the east of the structure. Owing to vegetation cover it was not possible to determine the physical or stratigraphic relationships between the bank, the quarry and the structure. The structure itself had undergone progressive collapse over many years, with the resulting tumble obscuring the original form and construction. The internal diameter at the top of the wall was approximately 8.50m.

Trench U was located in order to cross the wall of the structure at the most convenient point for access, which was on the eastern side (Fig. 7). The trench measured 2.70m north-south and 4.50m east-west in plan, and was excavated to a maximum depth of 1.50m below the modern ground surface.



Fig. 7. View of the structure looking west before excavation, showing the extent of collapse.

Excavation revealed that the circular wall was dry-built using limestone blocks laid to rough courses, with a rubble core. The original thickness of the wall was approximately 1.20m. Interestingly, Trench U was located over a possible entrance and/or drain which formed a gap in the circular wall; this tapered from 0.90m wide on the outside to around 0.80m on the inside. This rather unusual feature was constructed on two levels. It had been built as one with the rest of the structure: there was nothing to suggest any later insertions or other alterations.

The lower level had been excavated down to the natural limestone bedrock which formed the base – this was very irregularly finished and was clearly not intended as a floor surface. The sides of the resulting chamber were lined by coursed limestone blocks, and at this level the feature extended outside (ie. to the east of) the main structure by at least 1.65m, as well as internally for the full width of the main wall. The side-walls returned at each end to create a completely sealed chamber measuring around 1.10m deep. This had been roofed with large limestone slabs at approximately the modern ground level; one of these had subsequently been removed and another had collapsed into the chamber, allowing access for a partial excavation of the interior fill (Fig. 8).



Fig. 8. View of the entrance/drain structure after excavation, looking south-west. The scale rod is at the south-west corner of the entrance. The lining of the lower level can be seen extending beyond the structure to the east; the slab capping/floor can also be seen within the entrance to the west. Scale 2m.

The fill of this lower level comprised a series of rubble layers. The earliest of these was a compact light-brown silty clay with frequent small fragments of coal, lime mortar, limestone flacks and occasional clinker. An early 20th-century shotgun cartridge was found in this context. The layers above this contained substantial proportions of large limestone rubble from collapse and/or demolition, generally in a fairly loose matrix of mid-brown humic soil.

The upper level of the feature was perhaps an entrance to the structure. Its base was formed by the sandstone slabs, and it simply created a passageway to the interior – there was no extension outside the structure comparable to that of its subterranean counterpart.

The results from Trench U quite firmly refute the suggestion that this may have been a limekiln. The construction is of a high standard compared to other features at Hen Caerwys, which implies a later date. Although the evidence as currently understood remains ambiguous, the most likely interpretation is that this was an icehouse, probably serving Caerwys Hall (PRN 102719) some 200m to the south-west. The lower level of the entrance feature was probably a sump, intended to allow meltwater to seep below the floor surface. It is not yet clear how this sump was connected to the interior of the icehouse, nor whether (or where) it drained beyond this part of the site.

Closing the Site

Two trenches – E and F – were covered with a geotextile membrane and some spoil for protection in order that the excavations could be continued next year, in the event that resources become available.

Finds

As with the previous season 2014 was not a productive year in terms of artefacts. These have yet to be processed and sorted but a few preliminary remarks can be made on the basis of on-site observations. Trench F again produced a couple of flints, one a scraper to which a Bronze Age date can probably be ascribed. The spindle whorl from Trench R could be prehistoric, too, but might be Romano-British or medieval. Pottery, regardless of date, was decidedly sparse, but a few sherds of late medieval/early post-medieval material did come from the excavations in Trench E. Animal bone was more prevalent, being present in around two-thirds of the finds records.

Community involvement

As in previous years this has proved an extremely rewarding project. Hen Caerwys attracted a slightly lower number of community volunteers than in 2013 with the average number across the entire thirteen days dropping from 9.1 to 8.3, and on weekdays only from 11.0 to 9.1. On the other hand the overall number of community volunteers increased slightly from 22 to 24, and we were delighted to welcome back quite a number of old friends; at least eleven had worked at Hen Caerwys during an earlier season.

Going back to 2013 the local primary school, Ysgol yr Esgob, came for a tour of the site and excavations. This visit evidently planted a seed and this year the school have been carrying out a project that focuses on the long and interesting history of their place. On Thursday, 3rd July 2014 the school day was not a usual one. The day for years 5 and 6 began with a mini-bus trip to Coed Gerddi-gleision. On arriving on site around 20 children met with Caroline Pudney, Cadw's Community Archaeologist, who introduced them to the woodland and to the site itself. A tour of the earthworks and the excavation trenches gave them the opportunity to see what they had been learning about in the classroom for themselves and to ask the archaeologists questions about what they had found.

Prior to their arrival on site, the class had prepared some questions to ask the expert, Bob Silvester – and over lunch Bob was put under the spotlight where he successfully answered their queries and filled the gaps in their research. This session was recorded on video so that the pupils could use it in their project.

The afternoon was excavation time. Once the health and safety part was covered, test-pits were excavated enthusiastically by our budding young archaeologists using trowels, hand shovels and buckets. Although they did not quite get to the limestone pavement in each trench they excavated commendably well and recovered a number of small fragments of pottery. While they were excavating, the group were constantly relating their findings to the wider context of the site – an impressive attitude for such novice archaeologists.

Wanting to give the pupils a rounded experience of life on site, they were also given the opportunity to record their findings. In small groups and led by CPAT's Menna Bell, they were shown how to fill out context sheets, measure and plan their test-pit and even take levels using a dumpy level. Archaeology has a clever knack of subtly incorporating hard skills such as numeracy and literacy into a 'fun day out'.

The day was a great success, attested by the feedback from the pupils and staff at the school but also the parents of pupils, who approached us in the town to say how much their child had gained from the experience. The project has not only built a bond with local volunteers, who continue to return each season, but also the local school and the local community. The future generation of Caerwys will remember that Hen Caerwys is an old and special place. We hope that the legacy of working with the school is that this young generation pass on their appreciation of the site to their children and so on, thus ensuring its curation.

Acknowledgements

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