

# **Excavation of a pit and post-pad**

## **Caer Alyn, Wrexham**

### **Interim report**

**2011 – 2020**

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## **1.0 Summary**

**1.1** Between 2011 and 2020, the Caer Alyn Archaeological Project excavated a single trench on the edge of an uncultivated field, approximately 0.162 km to the east of Alyn Lodge, on the outskirts of the village of Llai, near Wrexham. The trench is located between a scheduled Bronze Age tumulus and the start of a sunken trackway that drops down into a steep valley.

The work consisted of single-context excavation and was undertaken to ascertain the function and date of several features that had emerged during a training dig for our youth group, and their possible relationship to the sunken trackway.

**1.2** This excavation was part of a broader, ongoing programme of research into the area around the Caer Alyn (Bryn Alyn) hillfort, which is being funded and carried out by the Caer Alyn Archaeological Project.

**1.3** The assemblage of finds contained a variety of materials, from the Mesolithic to the modern period, most of which represented small-scale post-medieval and modern domestic, agricultural and industrial activity. The most significant features identified were a possible post-pad and a shallow clay-lined pit containing prehistoric ceramic.

**1.4** Further excavation will be required to clarify the relationship, if any, between the pit, the possible post-pad and the trackway. It will also be necessary to determine if there are any more archaeological features within the immediate vicinity. Scientific testing is required on the clay from the pit to determine its origin. An expert report on the prehistoric ceramic found should be obtained to determine its date as precisely as possible.

## **2.0 Introduction**

**2.1** This excavation was initiated, funded and undertaken by the Caer Alyn Archaeological Project. This is a volunteer group based at Alyn Lodge, Llai, near Wrexham. There has been a volunteer archaeological and heritage project at Caer Alyn since 2004, but the nature, aims, composition and name of the group have altered over the last fifteen years.

**2.2** The Caer Alyn Archaeological Project is now an ongoing research initiative, which aims to investigate the environs around the Caer Alyn (or Bryn Alyn) hillfort, which is believed to be Iron Age in origin. The immediate vicinity of the fort includes a possible Bronze Age tumulus, the remains of an early medieval earthwork, Wat's Dyke, and possibly a missing medieval chapel.

**2.3** Initially, the trench was opened as a managed training excavation for our former youth group, CAYA (Caer Alyn Youth Archaeology). For this reason, this trench was named CAYA 1. Following the discovery of features of potential archaeological significance, the excavation was continued by the main excavation team with continued support from the youth group, with the aim of answering a set of specific research driven objectives.

## **3.0 Site Location, Geology, Topography and Current Land Use**

**NGR: SJ33305412**

### **3.1 Site Location**

The Caer Alyn Archaeological Project is situated on the southern edge of the modern community of Llai (or Llay) and was previously within the township of Llai. The site lies approximately 3.8 km north of Wrexham and 15.2 km south-west of Chester, just off the Llay New Road (the B5425).



*Fig 1. Location of Llay. Ordnance Survey Maps.*

<https://osmaps.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/>



**Fig 2. Caer Alyn (outlined) in relation to the villages of Llai (Llay) and Gresford.**

**Ordnance Survey Maps. <https://osmaps.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/>**

### **3.2 Solid Geology**

This consists of Carboniferous (Westphalian) Erbistock Sandstone formations which overlay Coed-Yr-Allt sandstones.<sup>1</sup>

### **3.3 Drift Geology**

The Caer Alyn site is located on the Wrexham Delta Terrace, which consists principally of deep deposits of fluvio-glacial sands and gravels.<sup>2</sup>

The subsoils across the site consist of a sandy loam containing small glacial pebbles and dispersed gravel.

### **3.4 Topography**

The Caer Alyn site lies on a well-drained lowland plateau, at a height of approximately 75m AOD. The core area of the project is residential and agricultural land and is defined by the course of the River Alyn to the east, west and south, by the Llay New Road (the B5425) to the north-west and by Pont-y-Capel Lane to the north-east.

### **3.5 Current Land Use**

The Caer Alyn plateau is accessed by a road branching off the Llay New Road (the B5425) at a crossroads. It contains three small complexes of buildings (see Fig 4, moving west to east): -

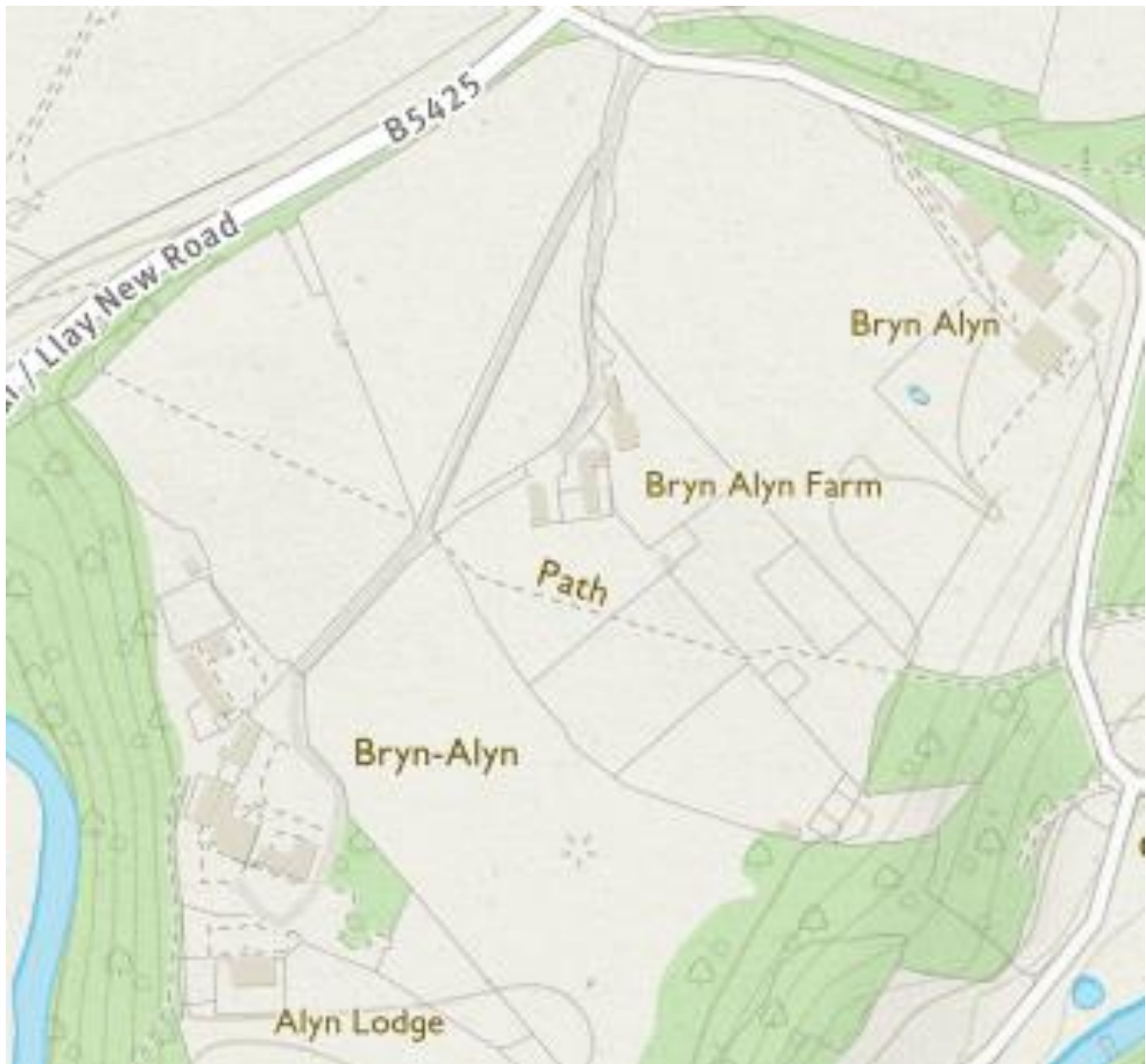
- Bryn Alyn, an area which contains Alyn Lodge, a conference centre and bed and breakfast, built in 1994; Blackley Hall, a complex of flats which incorporates a house dating from the eighteenth century, also known as Alyn Bank, Allen Bank, or Bryn Alyn, and a one-storey building which is the CAAP office.
- Bryn Alyn Farm or Hall, a Grade II listed building which has been recently renovated.
- Bryn Alyn, a working farm, also known as Little Bryn Alyn.

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<sup>1</sup> British Geological Survey. Wrexham Sheet 121, 1: 50 000.

<sup>2</sup> Landscape Character Area 8. Gwersyllt, Llay, Gresford, Borras. Wrexham County Borough Council 2007. Retrieved from <https://www.wrexham.gov.uk/assets/pdfs/planning/landmap/8.pdf>.

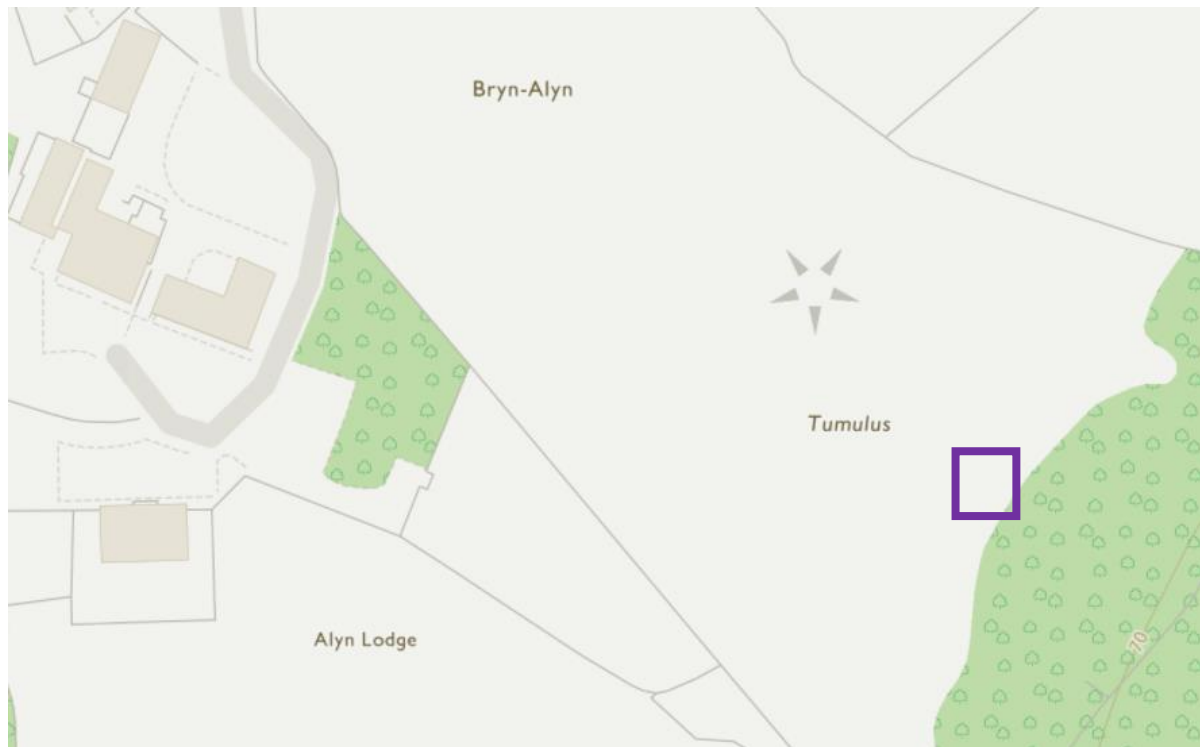




**Fig 3. The buildings on the Caer Alyn Plateau.**

**Ordnance Survey Maps. <https://osmaps.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/>**

The land surrounding these sets of buildings is currently divided into small fields, which are used as pasture for a small number of animals or as meadow. The CAYA 1 trench lies at the edge of meadowland, approximately 0.162 km due east of Alyn Lodge, on the edge of a ridge above the Wilderness Valley and the River Alyn (Fig 5).



**Fig 4. The location of the CAYA1 excavation (purple square). Ordnance Survey Maps. <https://osmaps.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/>**

## **4.0 Archaeological and Historical background**

### **4.1 Desk-based study**

A desk-based study was undertaken, involving an examination of all available primary and secondary records relating to the field in which the excavation took place, and the wider site. This study included documentary, cartographic and photographic sources, which have been listed in Section 10.

It should be noted that some archaeological features on the plateau are listed in records under the name 'Bryn Alyn' ('Alyn Hill'). The three complexes of buildings on the plateau have all at some time been called Bryn Alyn. However, the name Caer Alyn (Alyn Fort) is the name used by the Caer Alyn Archaeological Project for the research area.

**4.2** The information collected during desk-based research has been summarised below, organised by period. Details of any previous archaeological and geophysical investigations have also been included.

### **4.3 Prehistory (10,000BC – AD 43)**

Within the modern community of Llai, and to the north of Caer Alyn, finds of a pebble macehead (HER PRN CPAT100380), worked flints (HER PRN CPAT102880), a spindlewhorl (HER PRN CPAT100373), a Bronze Age palstave (HER PRN CPAT102665) and socketed axehead (HER PRN CPAT54918) are evidence of human activity in the prehistoric period, while an enclosure known as Y Gaer (HER PRN CPAT100351) may have late prehistoric origins.

On the plateau itself, the Bryn Alyn round barrow (HER PRN CPAT100378) has been scheduled as a Bronze Age tumulus.

The dominant archaeological feature at Caer Alyn is the Bryn Alyn promontory fort (HER PRN CPAT100384), a small but strongly defended enclosure situated on an inland promontory that juts into the valley of the River Alyn at a point where there is a sharp hairpin bend in the river. The interior of the fort has not been subject to excavation, although conservation and evaluation work was undertaken on part of the ramparts in 2007. It is scheduled and is considered to date from the Iron Age.

### **4.4 Roman (AD 43 –410)**

There are no known Roman sites or finds within the Caer Alyn area. During the construction of Alyn Lodge in 1996, two Roman coins were allegedly found but these were not recorded or reported and have now been lost.

However, within the area covered by the modern community of Llai, a Roman box and two Roman brooches have been recorded as finds (HER PRN CPAT54705, 54714 and

120904) while immediately to the east of Caer Alyn, on the other side of the River Alyn in and around the village of Gresford, there have been several Roman finds recorded. Numerous find spots in the Wrexham region, as well as Roman settlements at Plas Coch, Wrexham (HER PRN CPAT13092), 2.5 km to the south, and Holt (HER PRN CPAT101249), 7.5 km to the east, indicate a settled Roman presence in the wider area.

#### **4.5 Early Medieval (AD 410 – 1066)**

The best evidence for potential activity at Caer Alyn in this period is the linear earthwork, Wat's Dyke.

Sections of Wat's Dyke have been located both to the north-west (HER PRN CPAT106667 and 106668) and south of the plateau (HER PRN CPAT106669 through to HER PRN CPAT106672) and the course of the Dyke is believed to take the most direct course between these points, running along the western edge of the Caer Alyn plateau and seemingly incorporating the steep slope on the western side of the fort within its defences. There is no firm dating evidence or secure historical context for Wat's Dyke yet, but the earthwork appears, along with Offa's Dyke to the west, to have originated in the early medieval period as some form of boundary in this fiercely contested border zone between Wales and Mercia, and there is a possibility that the fort was either established or adapted at this time as part of this boundary.

The place-name 'Llay' or 'Llai' appears to derive from the Old English element 'leah', 'lea' or 'ley', generally considered to mean the '(place at) the wood or woodland clearing',<sup>3</sup> suggesting that the settlement originated in the early medieval period, at a time of Anglo-Saxon expansion in the area.

#### **4.6 Medieval (AD 1066-1500)**

The 1843 Tithe Map for Llai provides evidence of a dispersed settlement pattern, but the remains of a system of open-field agriculture; in 1843, Llai was still undergoing a

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<sup>3</sup> H. Wyn Owen, *Place-names of Dee and Alun*, pp. 22-23. H. Wyn Owen & R. Morgan – *Dictionary of the Place-Names of Wales*, (Ceredigion; Gomer Press, 2007), p. 292.

process of slow and piecemeal enclosure. Several 'quilllets' were recorded, some of which still survive today as hedged strips, 1 km north of Caer Alyn, by the modern cemetery (HER PRN CPAT121768).

A 1658 lease of a messuage and lands on the Caer Alyn plateau includes a field called 'Two Butts', possibly a record of a headland within what was once part of a medieval open field.

A previous excavation situated approximately 0.054 km from the CAYA 1 trench revealed the remains of stone structures that were interpreted by the archaeologist as a medieval corn or grain drying kiln (HER PRN CPAT128511). Finds included several pieces of medieval pottery. <sup>4</sup>

The Bryn Alyn Wall & Ditch (HER PRN CPAT102883), lying between Alyn Lodge and Blackley Hall, has not been definitively dated but may be medieval in origin.

Llai was a township in the large multi-township parish of Gresford until 1944. Documentary and landscape evidence suggest that the medieval free chapel of St. Leonard's de Glyn (HER PRN CPAT17011 and HER PRN CPAT100381) lay in Llai, perhaps close to Caer Alyn, but the site of the chapel has not yet been located.

#### **4.7 Post-medieval (AD 1500-1900)**

The HER, census returns and the 1843 Tithe Survey of Llai record a largely agricultural settlement and workforce for most of the nineteenth century, with some small-scale industrial activity such as brick production, gravel extraction, quarrying and coal mining.

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<sup>4</sup> A. Hanna, Archaeological Excavations at Tumulus Field, Caer Alyn. Interim Excavation Report. Caer Alyn Archaeological and Heritage Project, Report No 5, 2008, pp.12-14.

The Trevor family of Trevallyn Hall, Rossett and Plas Teg, Hope, appear to have held the western side of the Caer Alyn plateau and the land below it in the Alyn valley from at least 1658; a lease from that year, along with late eighteenth and early nineteenth century estate surveys, record this holding, which comprised a house, garden, orchard and fields.

Bryn Alyn Wall and Ditch (HER PRN CPAT102883) is the remains of a medieval or post-medieval low circular stone retaining wall that once had an outer ditch (HER PRN CPAT102883). It lies today between Alyn Lodge and Blackley Hall and appears to form part of the terminus of a trackway or carriageway that ran between Blackley Hall and Pont-y-Capel Lane in the valley below.

The Tithe Survey is the first map to detail the eastern half of the Caer Alyn plateau, which on the earlier Trevor estate maps is described only as 'glebe' land. The bulk of this area was owned by the Dean and Chapter of Winchester in 1843, save for a small portion on the north-east edge, where Little Bryn Alyn stands today, which belonged to the local vicar. Winchester appears to have owned the land since 1547, when Edward VI granted the advowson of Gresford to the Cathedral.

The present-day Grade II listed Bryn Alyn House, which is believed to date from the early nineteenth century (HER PRN CPAT36764), stands on the same site as buildings depicted within the glebe lands on the estate maps, and buildings which formed part of the Winchester holding in 1843. In 2007 limited excavations took place in the field lying immediately to the south of Bryn Alyn House; building debris from the mid-to-late nineteenth century was found here, but also fragments of late sixteenth or seventeenth century brick were recovered from a sealed deposit dated to the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup>

In 1843, the Winchester holding included an irregularly shaped field called 'Barn Field and Smith Close'. The south-western boundary of this field in 1843 took a very contorted route, marked by trees, some of which still stand today. This may in part be

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<sup>5</sup> A. Hanna, Archaeological Evaluation at Bryn Alyn Farm, Caer Alyn Archaeological and Heritage Project, Report No 16, 2007, pp. 1, 9 & 11.

explained by the need to incorporate features which are no longer evident in the landscape; at one point the field boundary appears to have curved around to include the Bryn Alyn Barrow.



***Fig 5. Drawing of Barn Field & Smith Close copied from the Tithe Map of 1843, with the approximate position of the Bryn Alyn barrow marked by a green circle.***

It appears that very little altered on the plateau between 1843 and 1900, except for a reorganisation of the boundary between the Trevor and Winchester holdings which divided 'Barn Field and Smith Close' between the two holdings at some time between 1843 and 1879.



***Fig 6. 1st Edition OS map, 1879. The red line follows the new field boundary made between the Alyn Bank and Bryn Alyn estates between 1843 and 1879; the curving line of single trees running across the fields are the remains of the boundary of the earlier field, 'Barn Field and Smith Close'. The larger of two trackways running from the Wilderness Valley to Alyn Bank runs east to west across the bottom of the map. Survey First Edition, Denbighshire (1879), 1<sup>st</sup> Edition, 6 inches to 1 mile.***



The CAYA 1 excavation lies on the south-eastern edge of the old 'Barn Field and Smith Close', on the edge of the plateau before it drops into the river valley. The old field name appears to refer to buildings that were recorded on the estate and Tithe maps as standing at the northern tip of the field; the remains of an old smithy were standing in this area until very recently.

The HER has noted possible post-medieval ridge and furrow ploughing in this field, to the south-west and south-east of the tumulus (HER PRN CPAT77874). In 1843 the field was used as arable.

The stone structure that has been posited as a medieval and/or post-medieval corn-drying kiln lies at the southern tip of the field.

Two trackways run up from the Alyn Valley, along the south-eastern edge of the plateau, roughly parallel with one another. The upper trackway becomes a hollow way, running between the edge of the plateau and a steep bank, just before it emerges onto the plateau immediately to the east of the CAYA 1 excavation. It is not recorded on OS mapping so its age cannot be determined.

The lower and larger trackway runs past the current excavation and the suggested corn-drying kiln and emerges onto the plateau further to the south, before turning sharply in a north-westerly direction and running towards Blackley Hall. It was reputed locally to be a carriageway (see Fig 6).

The modern B5425 passes Caer Alyn immediately to the north-west. Before it was extended in the early twentieth century, this road ran from Llai Green, past Bryn Alyn Farm, and terminated at Alyn Bank. Pont-y-Capel Lane branches off this road and runs down into the Alyn Valley to the east of the plateau. A footpath also runs over the plateau to the north of the trench, connecting the village of Bradley to the east and Pont-y-Capel Lane in the valley below (see Fig 6).

#### **4.8 Modern (AD 1900 – present-day)**

The community of Llai today comprises a village, an industrial estate, several farms and part of the Alyn Waters Country Park. The modern village was purpose-built to house the large workforce that came from all around the country to work at Llay Main Colliery, which began operating in the early 1920s.<sup>6</sup>

Modern development has had limited impact at Caer Alyn. The areas immediately around the three complexes of buildings have all been subject to localised disturbance in recent years, due to the demolition/construction/ renovation of buildings. There has also been possible sand and gravel extraction on the plateau, in the area immediately around the tumulus, although it is not possible to date this. On the eastern edge of the plateau is an area of deep hollows that may be the result of sand and gravel extraction, but the area is also reputed to have been used during World War II as an ammunition dump. Modern land-use appears to have been largely restricted to residential/agricultural pasture.

#### **5.0 Objectives and Methodology (include excavation methods)**

This was a long-term excavation, undertaken between 2011 and 2020 by volunteers at weekends and during two-week summer digs.

##### **5.1 Objectives**

Initially, the trench was opened as a managed training excavation for our former youth group, CAYA (Caer Alyn Youth Archaeology). For this reason, this trench was named CAYA 1. Following the discovery of features of potential archaeological significance, the excavation was continued by the main excavation team with

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<sup>6</sup> W.A. Boswell, ed., *Llay Village Trail*, (Clwyd County Council; Mold, 1979), p. 1. V. Tyler-Jones, *Llay Through the Ages; Photographs of the Colliery Years 1906-66*, (Llay Local History Group, Rossett, 1999), p. 2. <http://www.welshcoalmines.co.uk/North/LlayMain.htm>

continued support from the youth group, to address a set of specific research driven objectives: -

1. To identify and understand the archaeological features that were emerging (a clay-lined pit and possible post-holes);
2. To clarify if there was a relationship between these features and the sunken trackway immediately to the east of the trench;
3. To investigate the function and date of the sunken trackway.

## **5.2 Methodology**

**5.2.1** Neither a geophysics survey nor a metal detector survey was undertaken before excavation started.

**5.2.2** The work was undertaken only in suitable weather conditions consistent with good archaeological practice.

**5.2.3** The excavation followed MOLAS/IFA Field Excavation guidelines.

**5.2.4** No automated excavation techniques were used. Mattocks, spades and shovels were used for removing the overlying turf, and trowel and brush excavation for the subsequent contexts. Sieving was carried out on all soils removed from Context 2 and below.

**5.2.5** Single context recording was used.

**5.2.6** The site grid origin is at 53.079784 latitude and -2.996683 longitude (+/- 2 m). The site grid propagates north and east in 5m intervals and is oriented on grid north. The centre of the trench is located at 53.079689 latitude and -2.996560 longitude (+/- 4 m).

**5.2.7** All vertical measurements were made to Ordnance Datum using a localised TBM.

**5.2.8** All archaeological features were recorded at a scale of 1:20, all sections and elevations at a scale of 1:10.

**5.2.9** Soil samples were taken.

**5.2.10** All artefacts, except for metal, old glass and organic based material considered too delicate, were washed and dried before analysis. Artefacts were recorded by material and context on a database. Any finds that were believed to be of particular importance were recorded with a 'small find' number which was prefixed by the letter 'T'.

## **6.0 Results**

**6.1** In 2010 – 2011, a trench was opened by previous volunteer members (Trench 22). This trench was approximately 3m x 1m and ran in a south-easterly direction across the point where the uppermost trackway enters Tumulus Field. This trench was never backfilled, and there are no paper records available for it, but excavation had not penetrated below the topsoil. In 2011, the CAYA 1 trench was opened adjacent to Trench 22. CAYA 1 was then expanded, initially to the north-north-east in June 2018 by 1.5 metres, and then to the south-east in June 2019 by 1 m, to follow features that were revealed as the excavation progressed. In expanding to the south-east, the CAYA 1 trench has incorporated part of Trench 22. The finds from the only context in Trench 22 have therefore been included in the discussion of finds from Context 1 (see below).

**6.2** The dimensions of the CAYA 1 trench in August 2020 were 5.75 m x 5.75 m, and excavation had reached a depth of 35 cm across the trench (Contexts 1 and 2).

**6.3** The initial turf layer removed measured approximately 10 cm in depth.

**6.5** Analysis of ceramic finds is made with reference to the report prepared by Paul Blinkhorn (see Appendix 2, pp.43-47).

## **6.5 Contexts**

### **6.5.1 Context 1**

This context was not sieved.

The soil immediately below the turf was a fine-grained loam. This was to a depth of 10 cm across the whole trench.

Context 101 contained ceramic ranging in date from prehistoric to modern. However, only one small fragment of prehistoric material was found, another that is possibly Roman, and a small number of late-medieval and modern sherds; by far the biggest concentration of fragments date from the post-medieval period, amongst which Buckley-type Earthenware predominated. Fragments of brick and glass were also found, a buckle and pipe stem, small amounts of charcoal and slag and what appears to be part of a kiln-base.

The metal finds comprised nails, wire, link fencing, and a bolt. The bulk came from Trench 22. These finds could indicate that a modern metal fence and gate once ran across the sunken trackway as it entered Tumulus Field. This area is covered by low bushes today but there are metal fences in place along the sides of the trackway before it enters the field. Alternatively, the metal finds could have been brought in from another area and dumped at the edge of the field.

Several flint microliths and what may be flint or stone tools were also found in this layer.

### **6.5.2 Context 2**

The subsoil was a loamy sand & gravel, to a depth of 25 cm across the trench.

Once again, the bulk of pottery dated from the post-medieval period, with a preponderance of Buckley-type Earthenware. There were three fragments that may be Roman, but, as with all possible Roman finds in this trench, they were too small and abraded for confident identification. Only two pieces of late-medieval ceramic and ten fragments from the modern period were found.

Five fragments of fired clay building material were found, possibly burnt daub or tile, but these could not be dated due to their small size and heavy abrading.

Other finds include glass, brick, possible nails, charcoal, mortar, limestone and possible iron ore and slag.

This context also contained several pieces of flint; chippings, microliths and what appear to be tools.



**Fig 7. Context 102. The pit is in the top right-hand corner and the post-pad in the top left-hand corner.**

### **6.5.3 Context 3**

This context is a lens sitting at the bottom of Context 2. This layer has only been found in one specific area of the trench to date, lying over Context 5, the top of a clay-lined pit, but it may occur in other areas yet to be excavated to this level.

The soil was a loamy sand & gravel, to a depth of 10 cm.

The finds consisted of slag, limestone, metal, charcoal, brick, modern glass and post-medieval ceramic. There was a high proportion of worked and unworked flint found, but this cannot be securely dated by typology to a particular prehistoric period.

#### **6.5.4 Context 4**

This was a plough cut that was identified in section only, on the north-east side of the trench. It has not been excavated. Any ridge and furrow at this level in the rest of the trench was cut through and not noted until the end of the excavation. The ploughing furrow is 18 cm deep from the ground surface but appears to have been deeper, as the top of the ridge has been flattened at some point. The furrow is at an approximately 35° angle to the edge of the trench.

#### **6.5.5 Context 5**

This was a layer of large pebbles that defined the edge of a pit (Context 6).

The pebbles were rounded and appear to be river pebbles. This would suggest that the stones were brought onto the site, most probably from the Alyn River below.

#### **6.5.6 Context 6**

This was the cut of a pit, which was sub-oval in plan, and measured approximately 1.5 m long by 1.1 m at its widest point. The longest axis of the pit was orientated north-east. The pit was approximately 25 cm deep at its deepest point.





***Fig 8. The full extent of the pit (scale in 10 cm segments).***





**Fig 9. The excavated north terminus of the pit (scale in 10 cm segments).**

### **6.5.7 Context 7**

This was the fill of the pit, consisting of compacted sand silt with moderate inclusions of gravel.

The pit was initially half-sectioned. In 2020, the remaining half was excavated.

In total, 24 pieces of ceramic were found at varying levels in the pit. This ceramic has been identified as prehistoric.

Other finds in this context comprise two small, abraded fragments of what may be Roman ceramic or burnt daub or tile, some small pieces of charcoal, several fragments of chert, apparently unworked, and a stone scraper.

There were four large stones in the fill of the pit; these do not appear to have been deliberately placed, but instead to have tumbled in at some point after the pit had been dug and lined with clay.

**NB. With reference to the ceramics report (Appendix 5) please note that the ceramics referenced as Contexts 5, 6 and 8 were found in Context 7, but initially recorded incorrectly and this error was only noted and corrected after the report was compiled.**

**NB. A very small quantity of ceramic was found in 2020, when the second half of the pit was excavated and after the ceramics report was compiled. This fabric of this ceramic appears to be different to the prehistoric sherds analysed in the ceramics report (T51).**

#### **6.5.8 Context 8**

This was a lining of clay that lay beneath the fill of the pit. It is hoped that this clay lining can be scientifically analysed in the future to compare it with the closest natural source of clay, from the Wilderness Valley immediately to the south-east. The clay appears to be calcium-rich and far lighter in colour than the natural red, iron-rich clay from the Wilderness Valley.

The clay layer was roughly the same thickness across the pit (2-3 cm). A limited excavation measuring approximately 10 cm x 10 cm was carried out in the centre of the pit which revealed Context 9. There were no finds in this part of the clay lining. There was a slight rise in the middle of the pit; this may have been caused by root action from nearby trees but the limited excavation area did not cover this, so this could not be ascertained.

#### **6.5.9 Context 9**

This was a lining of small pebbles that lay under the clay lining of the pit. This feature sits in natural soils. This feature was left in place for future investigation. There were no finds.

#### **6.5.10 Context 10**

This was the cut of a post-pad. It was surrounded by large river-pebbles. It measured approximately 16 cm in width by 75 cm in length.

#### **6.5.11 Context 11**

As this feature was surrounded by large stones, it was initially thought it was a post-hole. However, after half-sectioning, the depth of the feature suggested it was more likely to be a post-pad, as the natural fine gravel layer that is found across the site was reached at a depth of approximately 25 cm. The only finds were three small pieces of lime, which were found in the upper part of the fill and were possibly due to agricultural activity. The fill was comprised of a fine red silt.

CAER ALYN ARCHAE



**Fig 10. The post-pad.**

2





**Fig 11. The post-pad after half-sectioning (scale in 10 cm segments).**

## **7.0 Conclusions and Recommendations**

### **7.1 Preliminary conclusions and interpretations**

Analysis of the excavation results and finds, along with specialist analysis of ceramics (Appendix 1), has failed to identify any specific type or phase of activity in CAYA 1.

Although relatively small, the total assemblage of finds contains a variety of materials, spanning a wide date range, from Mesolithic to modern. There are no finds that are unusual for the region.

Most of the assemblage in contexts 1-3 represents post-medieval and modern domestic refuse from a low-status household(s), along with agricultural and industrial activity on a small-scale; this is consistent with historical and

cartographical evidence of farms situated close to the trench from at least the seventeenth century onwards.

The ceramics report confirms that the range of fabrics found is typical for this region; the preponderance of Buckley-ware is expected, given that Buckley lies only 11 km away. In general, the post-medieval ceramic was comprised of small fragments of poor quality, a combination of functional crockery and vessels.

The wide range of dates for the finds in the uppermost contexts, and the fact that much of the ceramic consisted of small, abraded fragments, are indicative of plough disturbance of this area, in the post-medieval and/or modern periods. This corresponds with possible traces of ridge and furrow found in Context 4.

Evidence for medieval activity is limited. The small number of medieval pottery sherds all date to the fourteenth to fifteen centuries and possibly come from a single vessel.

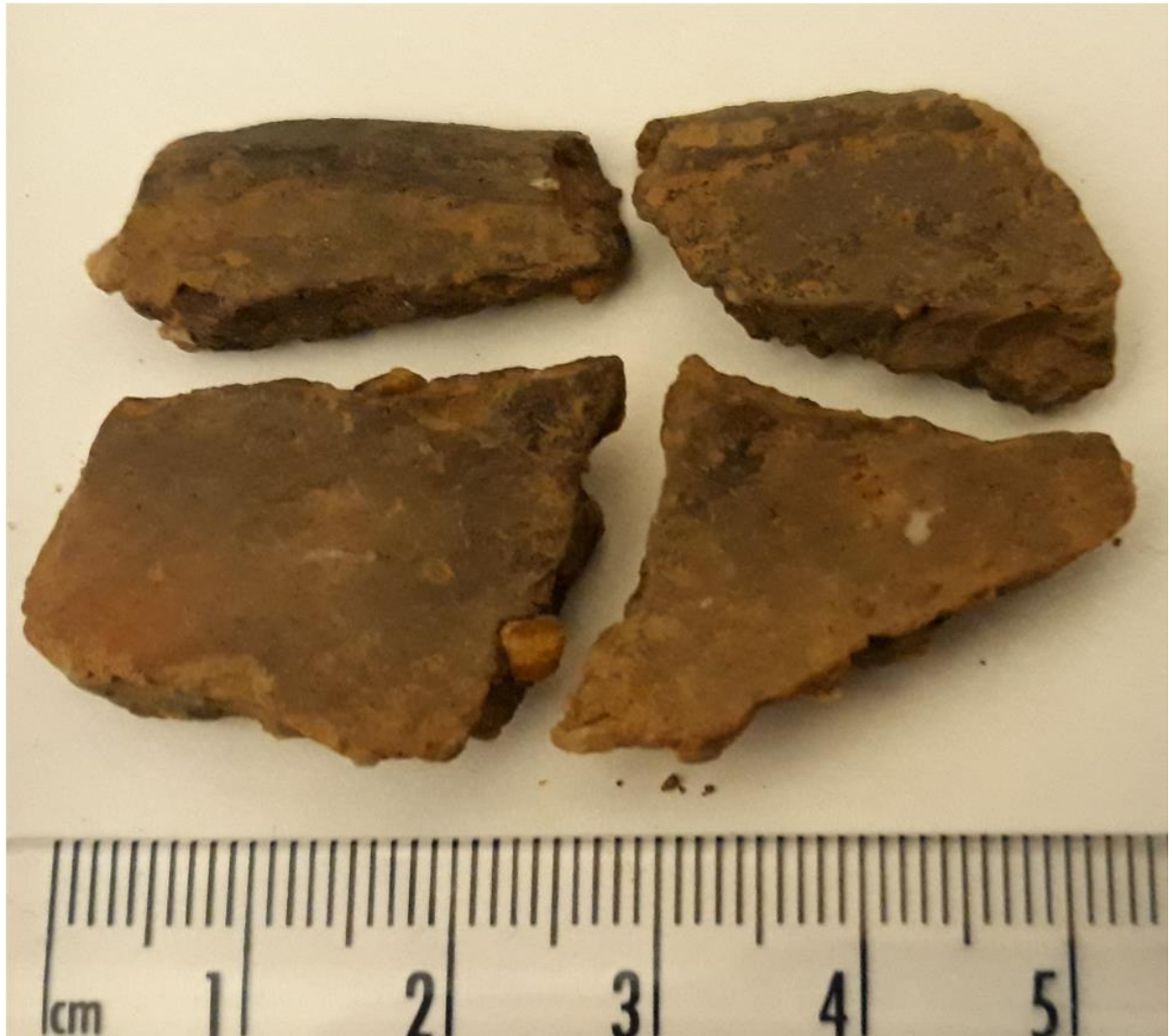
The most significant find of the excavation were 52 g of prehistoric ceramic; the majority of these were found in the shallow clay-lined pit and one sherd in Context 1.

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**Fig 12. The prehistoric ceramic found in the pit.**

Much of the assemblage consists of small, undecorated bodysherds, apart from four pieces that fit together to form part of an undecorated rim with a slightly everted profile.



***Fig 13. The four rim sherds (T44) of prehistoric ceramic which appear to show signs of burnishing.***

Only one sherd (T43) appears to have ring or coil-breaks, evidence of having been hand-built. The majority appear to have been pit fired. The level of firing suggests that the sherds came from domestic vessels, rather than burial urns, although the pots may have originally been used for domestic purposes, but then reused in a ritual context. Except for two pieces, the sherds were quartz tempered, with ground quartz inclusions varying in size from approximately 0.5 – 2mm. There were also small amounts of mica in some of the sherds, but this may have occurred naturally in the clay. Differences in the fabric of some of the sherds suggests that they came from several different vessels. Sherd T8, the only one to be found in Context 1,



appears markedly different to the others, with a very fine fabric and no obvious inclusions. This sherd is reduced throughout, apart from one side that has been slightly oxidised. The sherd is only slightly abraded, suggesting it has not moved far.

Two small fragments of ceramic (T51) were found in the pit after the ceramics report was compiled. They appear very different in composition to the other sherds, being heavily oxidised, more highly-fired and perhaps tempered with crushed pot (see Fig 15).



***Fig 14. Two pieces of ceramic found in the pit (Context 7), date to be ascertained.***

The above analysis is based on observation, the ceramics report provided by Paul Blinkhorn, and the generous help and advice provided by local archaeologists and museums (please see Acknowledgements). Blinkhorn has pointed out that it is rare to find prehistoric ceramic in this area of Wales and suggested that the sherds bear comparison to those found during the 1994-95 excavation at Plas Coch, Wrexham, 2.5 km to the south of Caer Alyn; these were the only evidence for prehistoric activity in an area of Roman-British settlement. Comparisons of the sherds with some of those found at Plas Coch was undertaken and the fabric does, at first sight, appear similar.

Many of the Plas Coch sherds were also very fragmented, and the majority also came from a small, shallow pit, although the Plas Coch pit was irregularly shaped and had a layer of small cobbles over the top,<sup>7</sup> whereas the Caer Alyn pit was oval and had an edging of medium-sized river cobbles. So whilst it is difficult to date the Caer Alyn sherds as they do not have any diagnostic features or decoration, the similarity with and proximity to the Plas Coch sherds is instructive. The latter have been dated to the Middle or Late Bronze Age, possibly between 1400 – 600 cal BC.<sup>8</sup> The consensus amongst the archaeologists consulted was that the Caer Alyn sherds could date from the Middle Bronze Age through to the Iron Age.

The Caer Alyn sherds, although fragmented, are not heavily abraded and as such, do not appear to have moved far or been subject to plough damage, indicating that they were deposited either in or very close to the pit. The sherds were found at various levels in the pit which suggests that they may have been washed in as the pit silted up, rather than deliberately placed, and so they cannot be used to date the pit fill or explain the purpose of the pit. The other finds from the pit cannot be accurately dated although the stone scraper may be Neolithic. As there were no finds in the pit lining, we have no reliable dating evidence for the construction of the pit.

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<sup>7</sup> N. W. Jones, (1997). *Plas Coch, Wrexham, Excavations 1994-5*. Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust Report 214, p.3.

<sup>8</sup> N. W. Jones, (1997). *Plas Coch, Wrexham, Excavations 1994-5*. Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust Report 214, p.7.



***Fig 15. The stone scraper found in Context 7.***

There is no obvious practical purpose for the pit having been created but the fact that it was clay-lined may suggest that it was used as a cistern. The location of the pit may be significant, as the remains of what is believed to be a Bronze Age round barrow lie just 0.052 km to the north-west. It is therefore possible that the sherds are the remains of a satellite burial from the barrow. Alternately, they may be all that remains of another barrow that once occupied the plateau edge.



**Fig 16. The Bryn Alyn Barrow, from the west.**

Approximately 0.054 km south-east of the pit, situated on the very edge of the ridge above the river valley, is the site of a previous excavation, which uncovered a stone-lined chamber and stone wall. These features were interpreted by the lead archaeologist as a medieval corn or grain drying kiln (HER PRN CPAT128511). However, there is a possibility that the structures are of prehistoric origin and that they were either reused or taken apart to build new structures in the medieval/post-medieval period, as several small slabs of stone found in the stone wall or immediately adjacent to it had what appear to be cup and axe marks carved into them.

There is the possibility, then, that this part of the Caer Alyn plateau may have contained several prehistoric ritual structures, and the pit may be the remains of another.

The worked and unworked flint and chert found in Contexts 1, 2, 3 and 7 may date from the Bronze Age but could indicate Neolithic activity. Flint microliths found in Contexts 1 and 2 suggest at least a transient Mesolithic presence on the Caer Alyn plateau.





***Fig 17. Flint microliths found in Contexts 1 and 2.***

The flint found in archaeological contexts at Caer Alyn must have been imported as it does not naturally occur in this area. The best naturally occurring material for prehistoric toolmaking in this region is chert.

There were two main aims set for this excavation. The first was to clarify the nature and relationship of the features that emerged when CAYA 1 was initially opened as a training excavation for our former youth group, primarily the clay-lined pit and possible post-holes. The second aim was to investigate the function and date of the sunken trackway and to clarify if there was a relationship between the features in the pit and the trackway.

These aims have not yet been fully accomplished; it has not been possible to clarify the function and date of the clay-lined pit or to date the one post-pad excavated to date, and the other possible post-holes or post-pads have not yet been excavated. At this stage of the excavation, it is not possible to ascertain if the pit and post-pad are contemporary. There is no evidence yet that the trackway continued into the CAYA 1 trench; however, further excavation would be needed to confirm this point.

## **7.2 Recommendations**

It will be necessary to extend the CAYA 1 trench towards the trackway leading up from the Wilderness Valley, to ascertain if there is any relationship between the trackway and the pit.

Further investigation is also needed to clarify if there is any relationship between the pit and the post-pad and the two other possible post-holes or post-pads need to be excavated.

It is hoped that a specialist analysis of the prehistoric ceramic can be obtained in the future, to provide more precise details as to its function, date and production.

Scientific tests are currently underway, at Campus Technology Hub, Daresbury Laboratory (STFC), using X-ray diffraction, to determine if there is any evidence of bone residue in the clay lining of the pit, but these tests have been delayed by the pandemic.

One possible technique to determine the similarity between the pit lining, the ceramic found and local clay beds would be ICPMS (Inductively Coupled Plasma Mass Spectrometry). This could establish whether the ceramic had been made locally or imported.

It is hoped that in future reports, and after further excavation, we can put the features found into a wider regional/national context.

## **8.0 Acknowledgments**

Caer Alyn Archaeological Project would like to thank Russell Evans, Ken White and Bill Devereux, the owners of land on the plateau and in the Wilderness Valley, for giving us access to their land, and for their valuable support over the years.

We would also like to express our appreciation to finds specialist Paul Blinkhorn for his extremely useful report on our ceramics.

Gratitude is extended to the following experts for their kind consideration of our prehistoric ceramic: -

- Dr Kevin Cootes, Director of Poulton Research Project and Senior Research Fellow at Liverpool John Moores University;
- Stephen Greuter, Heritage & Archives Lead, Wrexham County Borough Museum & Archives;
- Karen Murdoch, Collections Manager, Wrexham Heritage Services;
- Susie White, Finds Liaison Officer – Wales, Wrexham County Borough Museum & Archives;
- Liz Montgomery, Collections and Interpretation Officer, Grosvenor Museum, Chester;

Thank you to all the past and present members of our group who have worked on the CAYA1 trench. And finally, especial thanks to our youth group, CAYA, for their discovery of the pit and post-holes.

## 9.0 Site archive

Copies of this report will be deposited with Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust, the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales and Wrexham County Borough Museum & Archives.

Our site archive will be deposited with Wrexham County Borough Museum & Archives when the excavation has been completed.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1 – List and description of contexts in CAYA1 Trench

Context	Type	Fill Of	Description/Interpretation
101	Layer		Topsoil. A fine-grained loam.
102	Layer		Subsoil. A loamy sand & gravel.
103	Layer		Lens sitting at the bottom of Context 2. A loamy sand & gravel.
104	Cut		Plough-cut
105	Layer		Large river-pebbles outlining the top of pit.
106	Cut		Cut of pit
107	Fill	106	Fill of pit. Compacted sand silt with moderate inclusions of gravel.
108	Layer		Clay lining of pit.
109	Layer		Layer of small pebbles at base of pit.
110	Cut		Cut of post-pad, surrounded by large river-pebbles.
111	Fill	110	Fill of post-pad, comprised of a fine red silt.

## Appendix 2 – Ceramics Report

### Pottery from Caer Alyn

*Paul Blinkhorn*

The pottery assemblage comprised 116 sherds with a total weight of 333g. It consisted of a mixture of prehistoric, Romano-British, medieval and post-medieval material. The following fabric types were noted:

**BEW: Buckley-type Earthenware**, 17<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> century (Davey 1975). Hard red earthenware, usually with a black or dark purple/brown glaze. 51 sherds, 136g.

**BSW: Buckley-type Slipware**, late 17<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> century (ibid.). As BEW, often with a brown glaze and geometric and other decoration in contrasting slip. 4 sherds, 41g.

**EW: Ewloe-type Ware**, 14<sup>th</sup> – 15<sup>th</sup> century (Davey 1977, 92). Hard, white/pink/grey sandy ware in a range of medieval forms. 3 sherds, 15g.

**GRE: Glazed Red Earthenware**, 16<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> century (Brears 1969). Fine sandy earthenware, usually with a brown or green glaze, occurring in a range of utilitarian forms. Such 'country pottery' was first made in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and in some areas continued in use until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. 2 sherds, 8g.

**HOL OX: Holt Oxidised ware**, late 1<sup>st</sup> – mid 3<sup>rd</sup> century (Tomber and Dore 1998). 5 sherds, 9g.

**MOD: Miscellaneous Modern Wares**, 19<sup>th</sup> century +. A wide range of different types of pottery, including stoneware, porcelain and earthenwares, particularly white earthenware cups, plates and bowls with transfer-printed blue decoration. 17 sherds, 17g.

**MP: Midland Purple Ware**, 15<sup>th</sup> – mid 17<sup>th</sup> century. Hard-purplish grey ware, purple to black glaze (McCarthy and Brooks 1988, 427). 5 sherds, 21g.

**NOD: Nottingham/Derby Stoneware**, 18<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> century (Crossley 1994). Hard, grey fabric with brown surfaces. 1 sherd, 7g.

**PH: Prehistoric**. Sparse angular rock fragments up to 4mm. Bronze Age? 20 sherds, 52g.

**SMW: Staffordshire Manganese Mottled Ware**, late 17<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> century (Crossley 1994). Hard buff fabric with distinctive purplish-brown mottled glaze. Usually fine drinking pottery, but chamber pots and other more utilitarian vessels also known. 5 sherds, 19g.

**SS: Staffordshire-type Slipware**, mid 17<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> century (Crossley 1994). Fine cream fabric and pale yellow lead glaze, commonest decoration is feathered dark brown trailed slip. Chiefly press-moulded flat wares, although small bowls and mugs etc are known. 3 sherds, 8g.

The pottery occurrence by number and weight of sherds per context by fabric type is shown in Table 1. Each date should be regarded as a *terminus post quem*. The range of fabric types is fairly typical of sites in the region.

The small assemblage of prehistoric pottery consists largely of plain bodysherds, other than four re-fitting sherds from context 108 (T44) which are from an undecorated rim with a simple, slightly everted profile. They are mostly all very similar, and may be from a single vessel. Prehistoric pottery is somewhat rare in this area of Wales, but the sherds from this site are very similar to material from Plas Coch, Wrexham, and thus are very likely to be of the same general date, ie Middle-Late Bronze Age (Gibson 1997).

The small collection of Romano-British sherds are all small and abraded, meaning that the identifications should be regarded as tentative. The few sherds of medieval pottery all date to the later part of the period. The Ewloe-type Ware fragments are all very similar and possibly from a single vessel. The post-medieval material is mostly of a poor quality, and consists almost entirely of very small sherds which are largely residual. They are fragments of a typical mixture of utilitarian vessels and tablewares.

Fragments of fired clay building material in the form of burnt daub or tile were also noted, although all were too small and abraded to make confident dating possible. Context 102 (find no. 62) produced three fragments (18g), while find no. 52 from the same context included two fragments (7g). Context 107 produced a single fragment (2g).

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Table 1: Pottery occurrence by number and weight (in g) of sherds per context by fabric type.

Cntxt	Find No.	PH		HOLOX		EW		MP		GRE		BEW		SS		SMW		BSW		NOD		MOD		Date
		No	Wt	No	Wt	No	Wt	No	Wt	No	Wt	No	Wt	No	Wt	No	Wt	No	Wt	No	Wt	No	Wt	
101								3	15			24	52			1	4					2	2	MOD
101	T1																	1	4					L17thC
101	T2													1	5									M17thC
101	T3																					5	5	MOD
101	T5					1	4																	14thC
101	T7							1	3															15thC
101	T8	1	1																					PHIST?
101	T11																	1	21					L17thC
101	T12			1	1																			RB?
101	T17					1	7																	14thC
102				1	3							2	8			1	5					5	5	MOD
102	20							1	3			5	5	1	1							3	3	MOD
102	39											1	1											17thC
102	43											2	4											17thC
102	46																					1	1	MOD
102	47											1	1			1	4	1	1					L17thC
102	48			1	1							1	1			1	4							L17thC
102	49									1	2													16thC
102	50																					1	1	MOD
102	52									1	6	1	1			1	2							L17thC
102	53											1	2											17thC
102	54											4	11											17thC
102	59			1	2							4	24								1	7		18thC
102	T21																	1	15					L17thC
102	T22					1	4																	14thC
102	T35											1	7											17thC
102	T49											1	16											17thC
103	9											3	3	1	2									M17thC
105	T37	1	6																					PHIST

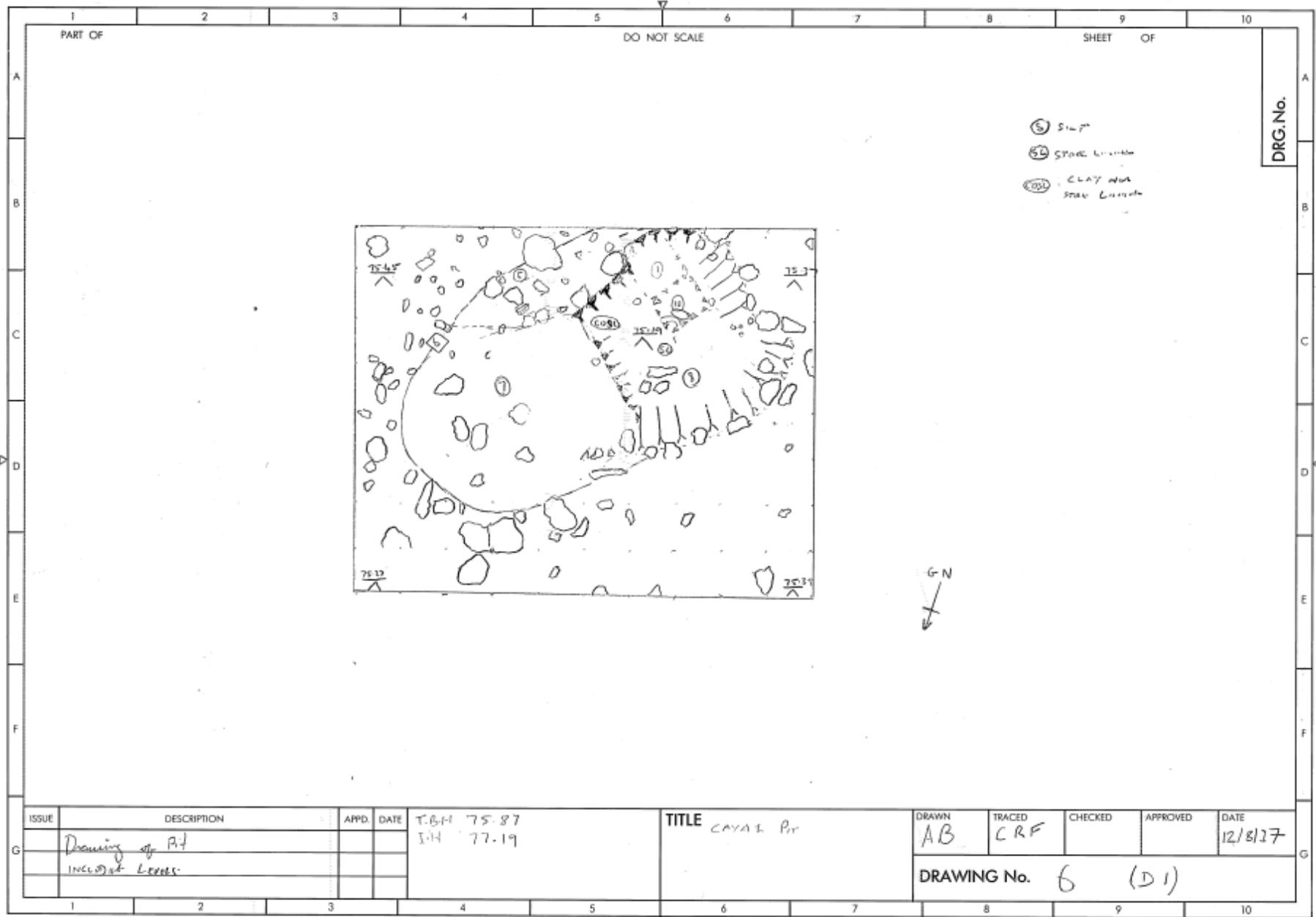
Cntxt	Find No.	PH		HOL OX		EW		MP		GRE		BEW		SS		SMW		BSW		NOD		MOD		Date
		No	Wt	No	Wt	No	Wt	No	Wt	No	Wt	No	Wt	No	Wt	No	Wt	No	Wt	No	Wt	No	Wt	
106	T38	6	12																					PHIST
107	39			1	2																			RB?
107	40	1	1																					P/HIST?
107	41	2	2																					P/HIST?
107	T42	1	6																					PHIST
107	T43	1	8																					PHIST
108	T44	4	10																					PHIST
108	T45	1	3																					PHIST
108	T46	1	1																					PHIST
108	T47	1	2																					PHIST
	Total	20	52	5	9	3	15	5	21	2	8	51	136	3	8	5	19	4	41	1	7	17	17	

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### 3b. Plan of Pit



### 3c. Section of Pit

