

# The Excavation of Castell, Porth Trefadog, A Coastal Promontory Fort in North Wales

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*CASTELL is a promontory fort on the north-west coast of Anglesey. The surviving defences were erected in or before the 12th century A.D. on the ruins of an earlier fortification and are contemporary with the occupation of a rectangular house or hall. The house was subsequently used for metalworking. The excavation of Castell is described and the possible historical contexts for the fortification of the Porth Trefadog promontory are discussed.*

Castell is sited on boulder clay capping harder rock forming a promontory immediately to the S. of the deeply indented bay of Porth Trefadog on the NW. coast of Anglesey (Fig. 1). The promontory is the object of erosion by sea and storm; inshore rocks protect the NW. face from direct attack by the sea but the bay is not so protected. Wave action is severely eroding this stretch of coast and has begun to attack the underlying rock on the NE. face of the promontory. A more immediate threat is posed by slumping due to the water content of the soil along the cliff faces.

The principal surface features of the site are a massive bank of dump construction with a deep external ditch defining two landward sides of a rectangular area of around 225 sq.m. The two remaining sides of cliff face are bounded by a slighter but more regular wall incorporating masonry in its construction. The SE. circuit of ditch appears to be a modification of a natural gulley (Figs. 1 and 2). Masonry is exposed along the length of the NW. cliff edge wall and a length of the dump bank had been removed prior to the Royal Commission survey of 1933.<sup>1</sup>

The promontory is likely to have been more extensive in antiquity. Much of the N. wall of what proved to have been a rectangular house has been lost to the sea, and what remains now sits on the cliff edge. Nevertheless, the defence may always have been massive in relation to the area enclosed, a characteristic shared with many other western British coastal sites of wide distribution and chronological range.<sup>2</sup>

## THE EXCAVATIONS

Excavations took place adjacent to the eroding cliff edge during the summer of 1984. An area of around 200 sq.m was excavated by hand across the bank and ditch

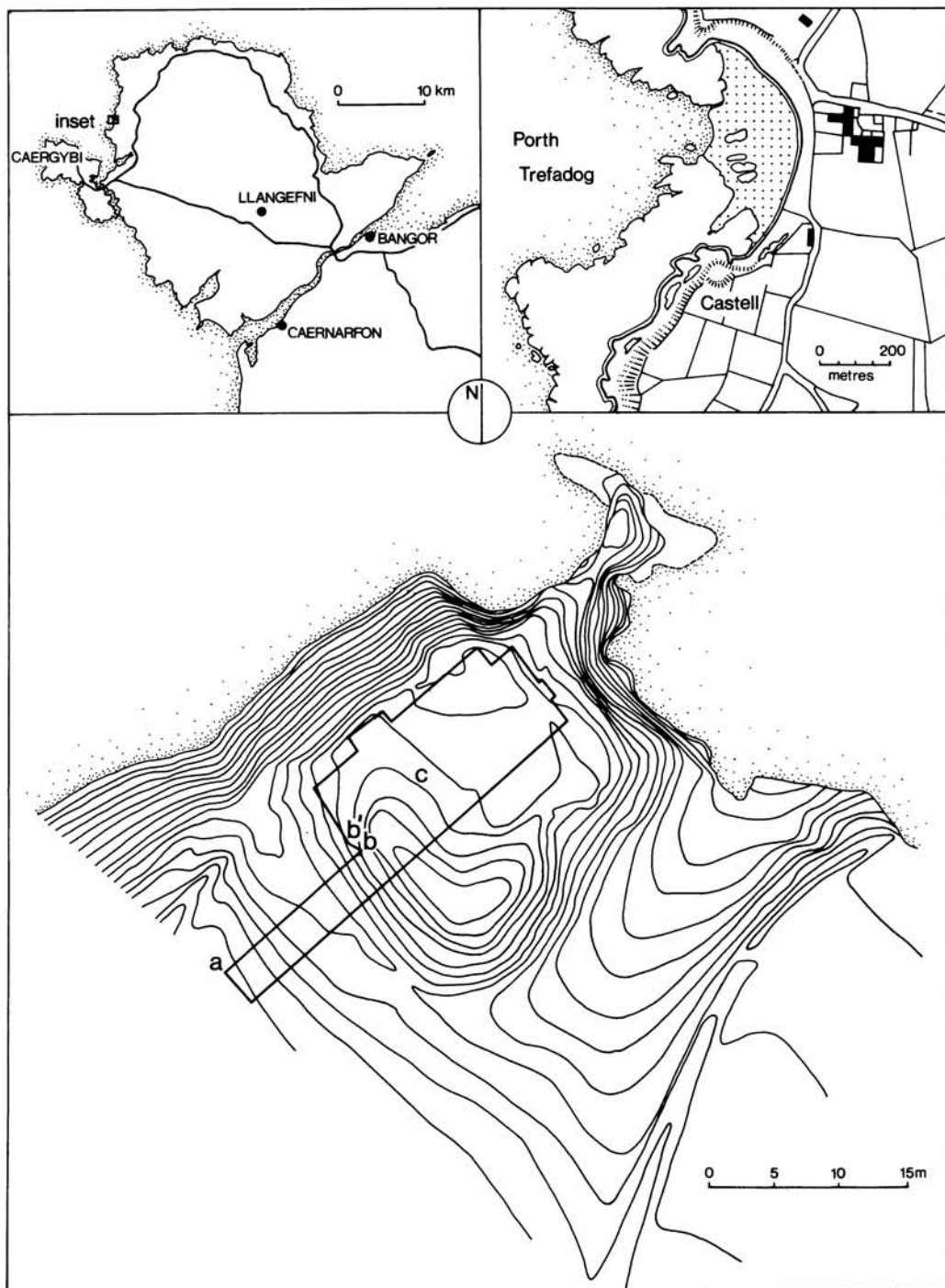


FIG. 1

Castell, Trefadog. Location and contour survey (contours at 50 cm intervals. Crest of bank is approx. 12 m above Ordnance datum)

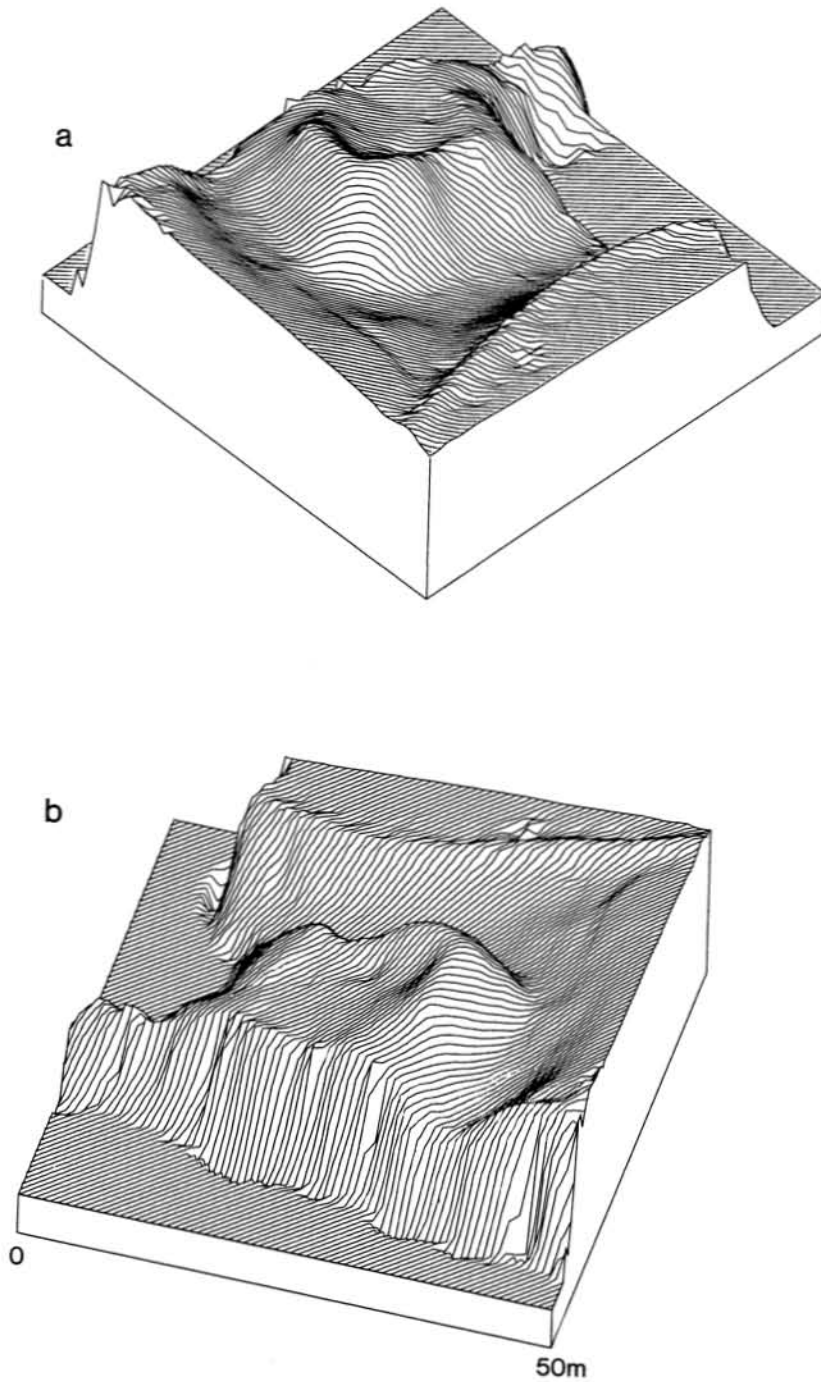


FIG. 2

Computer-generated 3D-image of site. *a.* From S. *b.* From NW.

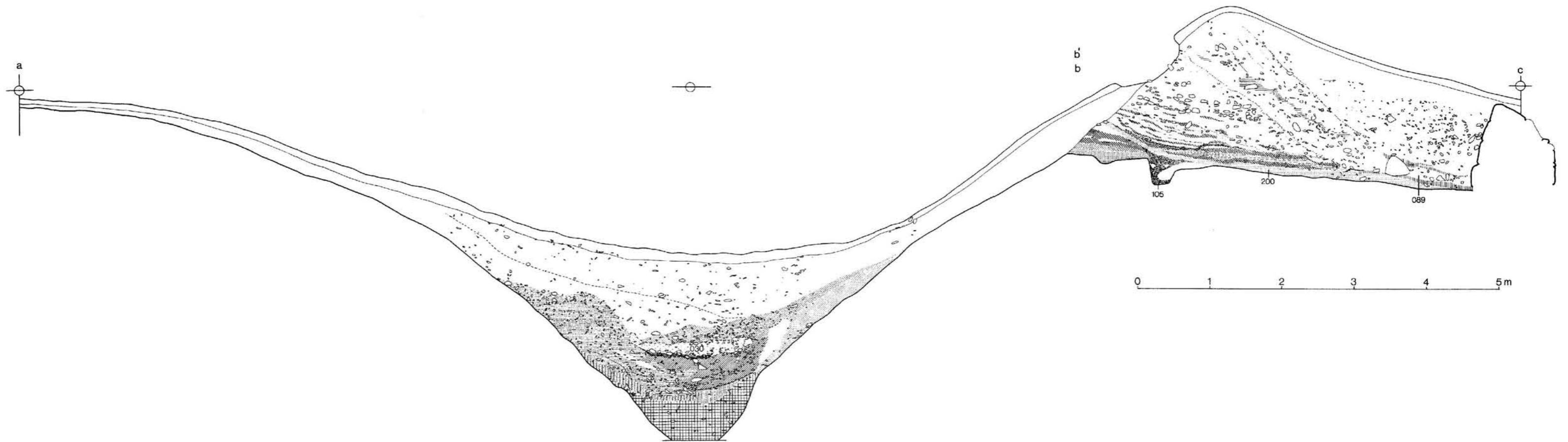


FIG. 3  
Section through defences. For location see Fig. 1.



defences and over most of the enclosed interior, with emphasis on that part of the site closest to the eroding cliff edge. Five phases were identified which may be summarized as follows:

- Phase 1 — construction of rampart with timber rear revetment.
- Phase 2 — a rampart of dump construction with external, V-profile ditch, and rectangular house within the defences.
- Phase 3 — refurbishment of phase 2 defences, and continued occupation of phase 2 house.
- Phase 4 — metalworking hearths established within the house during the 12th or 13th century.
- Phase 5 — recent disturbances associated primarily with the creation of field banks on the promontory during the 18th and 19th centuries.

#### PHASE 1

The remnants of the turf lower courses of a bank, backed by a timber revetment, are overlain by a succession of later ramparts. Only the rear portion of this original bank survives, the front having been cut away by later ditches (Figs. 3 and 4).

The timber revetment was set in a slot (105) 0.4 m deep by approximately 0.3 m wide and chocked in place by large stones 0.2 to 0.3 m across. A barely perceptible discoloration in the boulder clay subsoil may represent the continuation of this line in the direction of the present cliff edge — across the line of the phase 2 possible postern described below — although the turf bank could not be traced beyond the limit of the later rampart. Scarping of the rampart terminal, quarrying for field bank material and footpath erosion have all taken their toll. The scale of this original defence of the promontory or even of the promontory itself, cannot now be ascertained. Its chronology is likewise unknown, although two pottery sherds (one, 105, is described in the catalogue of finds, see p. 78), in secondary contexts, indicate some activity in the area during the Roman period; glass fragment 138 could conceivably be Roman but is not securely dated.

#### PHASE 2

An orange-brown gritty soil (200) overlies the tail of the phase 1 rampart. The phase 2 defence and a rectangular house within the defences were constructed on this ground surface. The rampart terminates about 2.5 m from the present cliff edge and, after a minimal gap which cannot have been greater than 1 m, can be seen to recommence. The core of this continuation towards the cliff edge was not observed in plan but was recorded in section (Fig. 7a) and its slip was planned (Fig. 5). It may be that this gap constituted a postern, with the main gate to the E. in line with the paved path from the doorway of the house.<sup>3</sup>

The lowest courses of the rampart are bands of turf which had been laid over the rear of the early bank; towards the front the turves are stacked slightly higher. This make-up is capped by boulder clay and, through one course, boulder clay with an admixture of beach pebbles, to a surviving height of 1.5 m above the ground surface upon which it was constructed. The bank almost certainly stood higher than this and would have extended beyond the present eroded face.

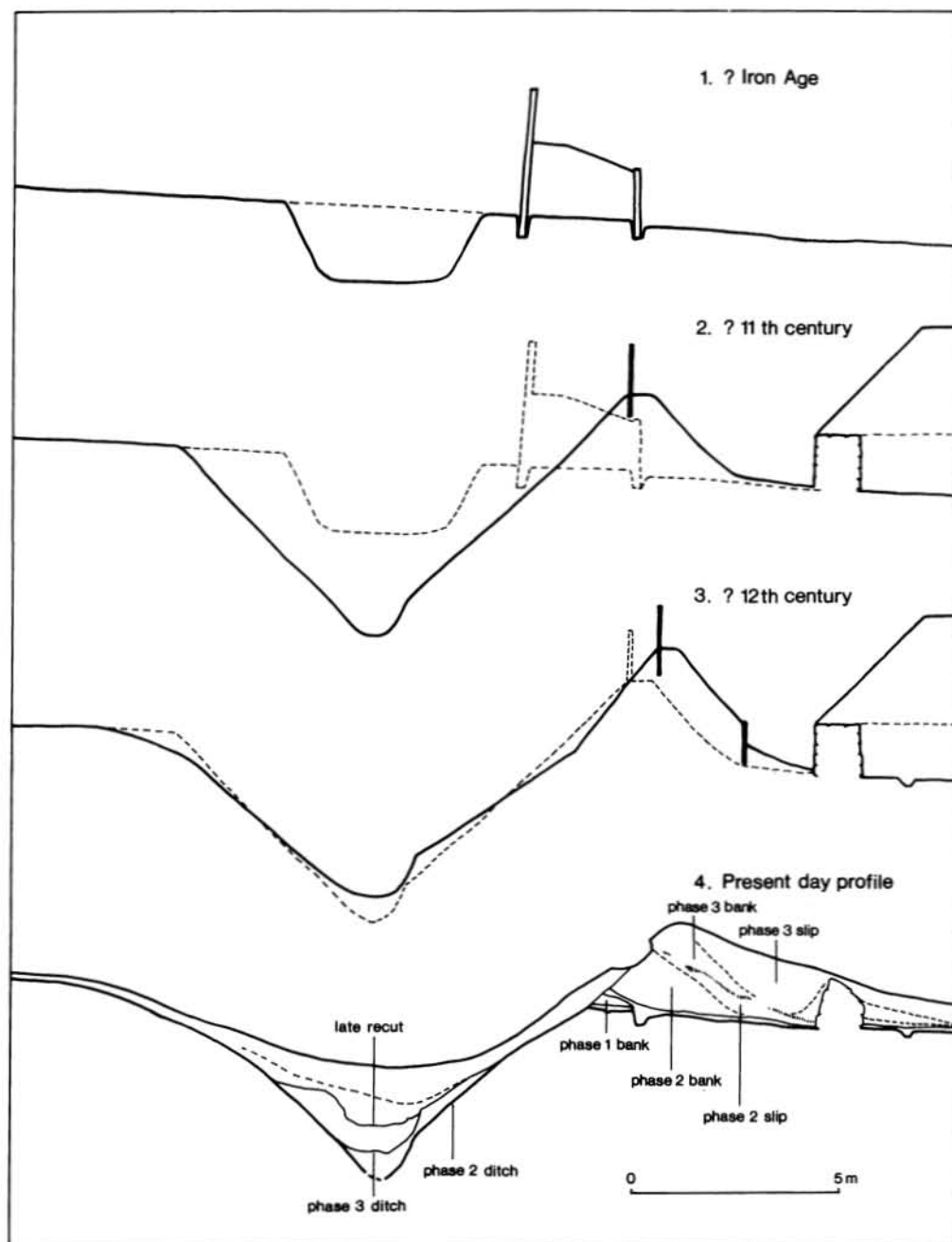


FIG. 4

Hypothetical reconstruction of defence sequence



FIG. 5

The interior after first cleaning. The robber trench for the east wall of the rectangular house is visible as a void. The concentrations of burnt clay are shown solid. The limits of bank slip either side of the postulated postern are also visible



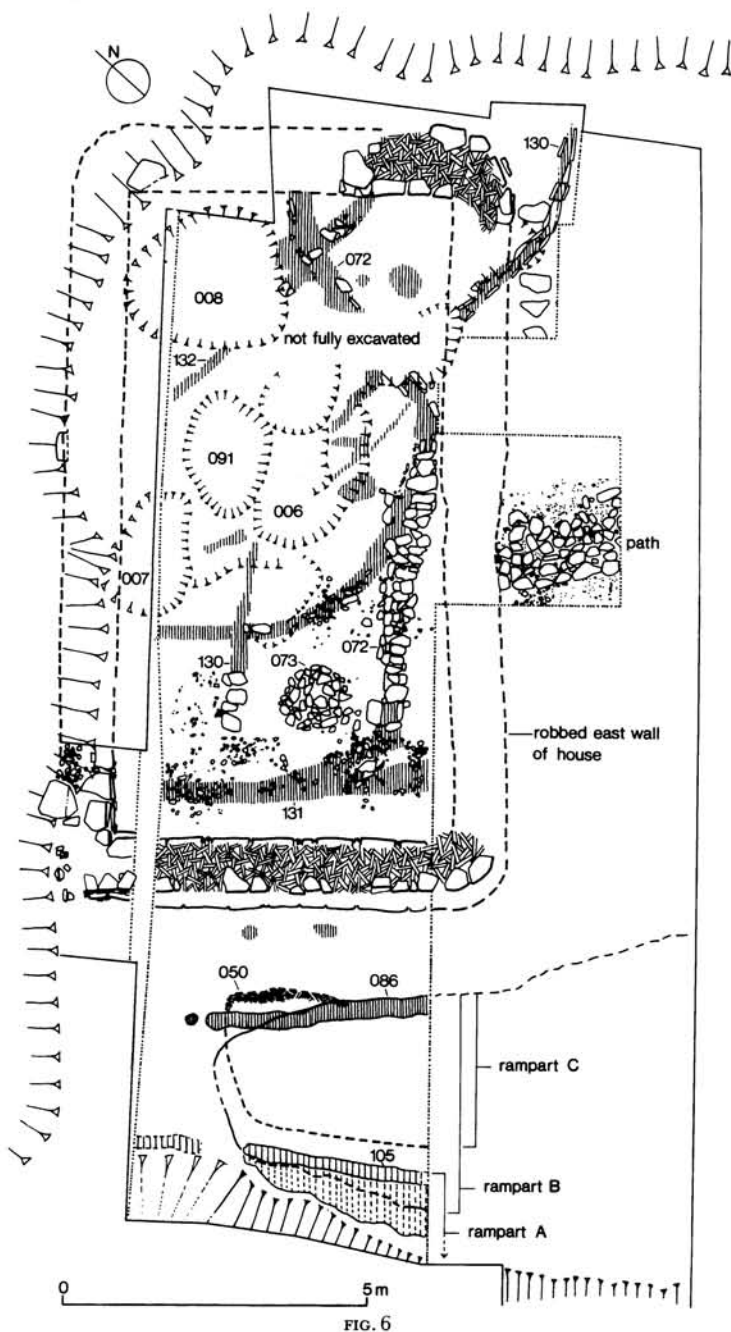


FIG. 6

The major arrangements of the rectangular house and the later disturbance which has removed much of the earlier stratigraphy. The successive additions to the rampart are planned on the remnants of the preceding phase. Rampart A is truncated by later ditches

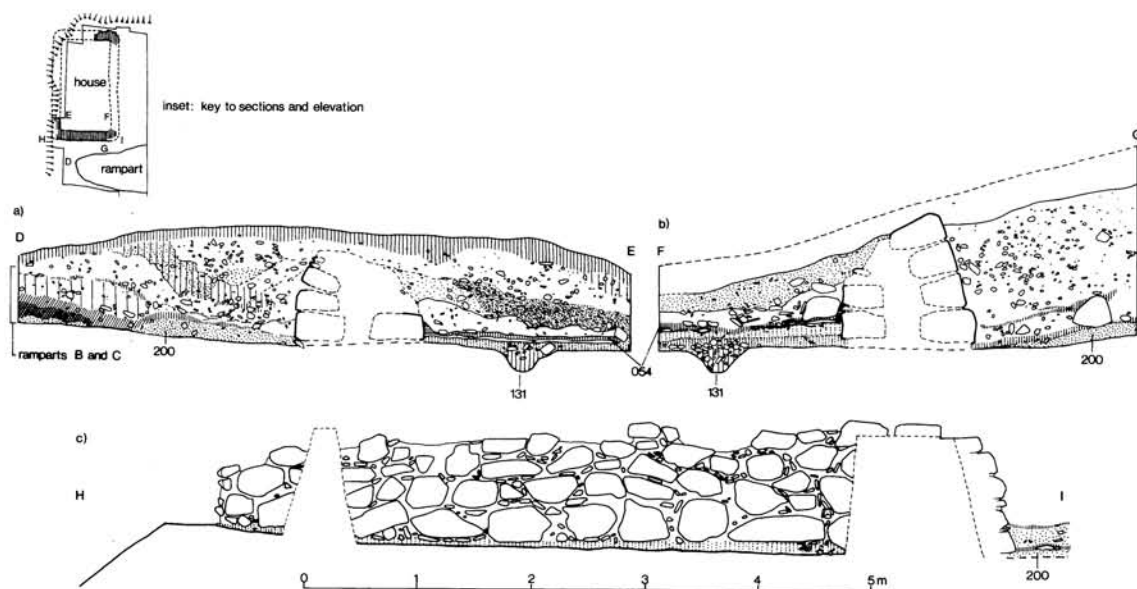


FIG. 7

S. facing elevation of rectangular structure and sections across the S. wall. Immediately below 054, floor surfaces are preserved. Immediately above 054, a clean clay with stones layer represents collapse of the house wall. Above this, bank slips encroach on the interior of the house

The phase 1 rampart may have been provided with a ditch but if so, all trace of it was removed during the excavation of a ditch in front of the phase 2 rampart. This ditch was roughly V-profiled with a slightly expanded and rounded bottom. The total effect would have been of an impressive obstacle 13 m wide with the crest of the rampart rising 6 m above the bottom of the ditch and perhaps a breastwork carrying the defence still higher (Figs. 3 and 4).

The phase 2 defences are not dated. They are, however, contemporary with the building of the rectangular house, which was abandoned as a domestic building during the 11th or 12th century.

#### THE HOUSE (Figs. 6 and 7)

##### *Walls*

Within the interior, a large part of the excavated area was occupied by the remains of a rectangular stone structure which measured 10.5 m by 5.5 m internally. The well-built walls, 1.2 m thick, were faced with large stones, 0.3 to 0.5 m across, bonded with clay. The core of the wall was also of clay. In the lee of the rampart the S. wall stands to a height of four courses — over 1 m. This may be close to the original height, from which a pitched roof, perhaps thatched, could have sprung. The E. wall was entirely stripped of stone at a relatively recent date, and subsequent to the quarrying of much of the interior of the building during the creation of the 18th- or 19th-century field banks along the cliff edge. A robber trench now reveals the line of the E. wall (compare Fig. 5 with Fig. 6). The lowest course of the N. wall partially

survives and it too has been robbed. A remnant of the W. wall stands perched on the cliff edge. Facing stones protrude from under the field bank that follows this line before the bank turns E., superimposed on the N. wall of the house.

### *Path*

A doorway must have been provided midway along the length of the E. wall. No trace of this has survived stone robbing, but its former existence is indicated by a flagged path, 1.4 m wide, leading from the house towards a marked depression in the rampart line on the E. beyond the limit of the excavated area.

### *Floor, hearth and drains*

Over half of the floor surface of the house had been removed by later activities: metal smelting, excavation of material for post-medieval field banks and treasure hunting on a large scale. The S. third has, however, survived intact, sealed by roof collapse, the decay of the stone walls and ultimately by slippage from the rampart. In the lee of the S. wall some reflooring is suggested by two or three lenses of dirtied clay (Figs. 7a and 7b).

The house was provided with a circular stone-set heart and an elaborate drainage system. The hearth (073) towards the S. end comprised a small number of stones up to 0.2 m across. A drain (131) packed with small stones runs between the hearth and the S. wall of the house before joining one of the two main drains (072) running N. from a point of origin either side of the hearth. These two drains (072, 130), 0.2 m deep, lined and capped with flat stones, run parallel with the long axis of the house before winding a sinuous course through the N. half of the building. They cross each other's path and 072 is crossed by a third drain (132) before it reaches the N. wall. It was not possible to establish the sequential relationship of these features. Only one drain (130) can be shown to flow out of the building; another (072) butts up against the N. wall, and the third (132) terminates at a point where the N. wall has been robbed. It is just possible that this robbing has obscured the former existence of a doorway in this gable end.<sup>4</sup>

### PHASE 3

Some slipping of the back and front faces of the phase 2 rampart had taken place when the phase 3 modifications were effected. The ditch had half filled with silt which incorporated some relatively large and flat stones, up to 0.4 m across, derived from the base of the phase 2 rampart. One stone survives in the excavated section of the rampart; debris from the rear of the bank (089) also accumulated against the lowest course of the house (Fig. 3).

The rampart was refurbished by heightening the existing structure with a dump of boulder clay retained by a timber wall to the rear. The evidence for this timber revetment is extremely tenuous, being a slight linear depression in the turf basal layer at the rear of the phase 2 rampart B, now filled with clay bank slip (086) (Fig. 6). About 0.6 m above this, at the point where the boulder clay of the surviving core of rampart is encountered, a wedge of clean clay (050) with a vertical back face

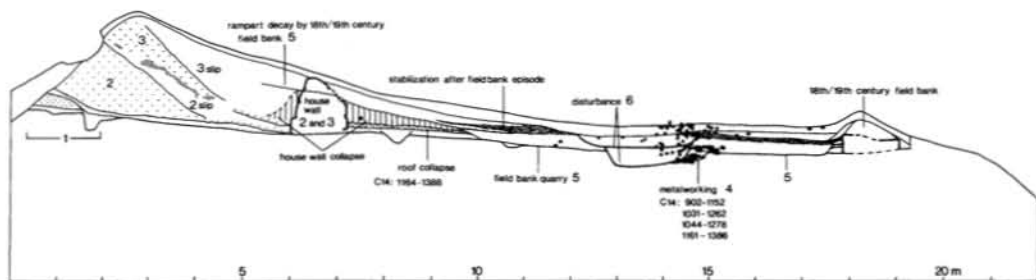


FIG. 8

Diagrammatic (measured) representation of the stratigraphic sequence across the rampart and the rectangular house. Dots plot metalworking debris

caps the rampart. A projection downwards of this vertical face was observed as a very slight change in the relative coarseness of the rampart material. The clay capping was observed for a length of only 2 m at the rampart terminal and is not recorded on the drawn section. These features are interpreted as the cut for a timber revetment through the slip of the phase 2 rampart to a depth of 0.6 m but barely penetrating the base of the phase 2 rampart. The boulder clay core of the phase 3 rampart was subsequently capped by clean smooth clay at the point where it abutted the rear revetment near the rampart terminal.

The silted phase 2 ditch was recut, but not quite to its original depth. The effect of prior silting and erosion of the inner lip of the ditch, perhaps now emphasized by scarping, produced a slightly more gentle gradient. The ditch appears to have seen further limited cleaning before being abandoned to the silting process that produced the present profile. A lower fill of this final recut comprises a 0.2 m deposit of clean, presumably storm-blown, sand (030) (Figs. 3 and 4).<sup>5</sup>

The later history of the rampart is one of decay. Some excavation of the terminal may have occurred late in the history of the monument, either to allow access or, more probably, to obtain material for the cliff-edge field bank. Phases of stabilization are recognizable as thin turf lines in the eroded bank material but the process is one of gradual collapse. The top course of stone in the S. wall of the house would still have been visible in the 18th century; by the 20th century it had been overwhelmed by slip from the rampart (Fig. 8).

#### *The abandonment of the house and associated finds*

Only two artefacts of any significance were found in association with occupation surfaces of the house. A sharpening stone, 153, lay on the ground immediately adjacent to the capstones of the easternmost drain. A bent bronze pin shaft, 142, lay on the stone surface of the path leading from the E. wall of the house. Neither offers any indication of date.

Once the house was abandoned a slow process of decay began. A richly organic layer (054), perhaps representing the collapse of the roof, seals the latest floor surface. Three iron nails were found mixed with this material as were fragments from two iron knives. Two other nails, of 'brad' type, occurred on one of the house floor

surfaces and in soil associated with the initial phase of decay. Clay and facing stones tumbled off both sides of the house wall, whilst clay from the rampart eroded to fill the space between it and the S. wall of the house, pushing the wall slightly inward as it did so (Figs. 3, 7 and 8). A phase of stabilization can be recognized in the accumulation of debris within the house but, in time, rampart material spilled over the S. wall into the interior. A spindlewhorl became incorporated in these later phases of collapse.

Radiocarbon determinations (see below) from the components of the postulated roof collapse, together with determinations from metalworking hearths (which are presumed to post-date domestic occupation) suggest that the building was abandoned during the 12th or 13th century.

#### PHASE 4

##### *Metalworking hearths* (Fig. 9)

At least five heavily burnt bowl-shaped depressions, and spreads of charcoal and slag, were recognized towards the N. end of the house. They ranged in size from over one to 0.3 m, the majority falling towards the lower end of the range. The presence of slag and burning *in situ*, and the heavy concentration of burnt clay and slag fragments in the fill of later excavations in the immediate vicinity of these hollows, confirms that they are ironworking hearths of which only the bottoms survive. The scooping up of material for the construction of the cliff-edge field bank and, equally destructively, the recent excavation of a series of large deep holes in recent times, has removed their upper fills and destroyed almost all evidence of the relationship between these hearths and the floor surfaces of the rectangular house. Only one hearth (061), a shallow bowl with charcoal, grey ashy silt and burnt clay, can be recognized as cutting a feature associated with the occupation of the house, the fill of an internal drain (132).

Seven radiocarbon determinations are available, relating to four of the hearths. The calibrations are quoted at a 2 sigma level of calibrated weighted average using the University of Washington Radiocarbon Calibration Program 'Calib'.

CAR-907	hearth (061): ad 860 ± 60	A.D. 902-1152
CAR-908	hearth (061): ad 1010 ± 60	
CAR-902	hearth (108): ad 1180 ± 60	A.D. 1031-1262
CAR-903	hearth (108): ad 1000 ± 60	
CAR-909	hearth (117): ad 1150 ± 60	A.D. 1044-1278
CAR-910	hearth (117): ad 1100 ± 60	
CAR-904	hearth (116): ad 1200 ± 60	A.D. 1161-1386

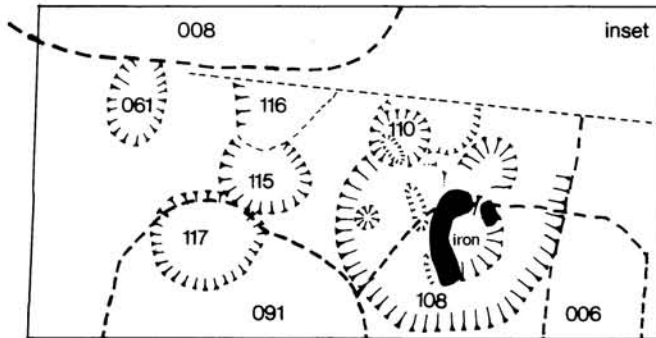
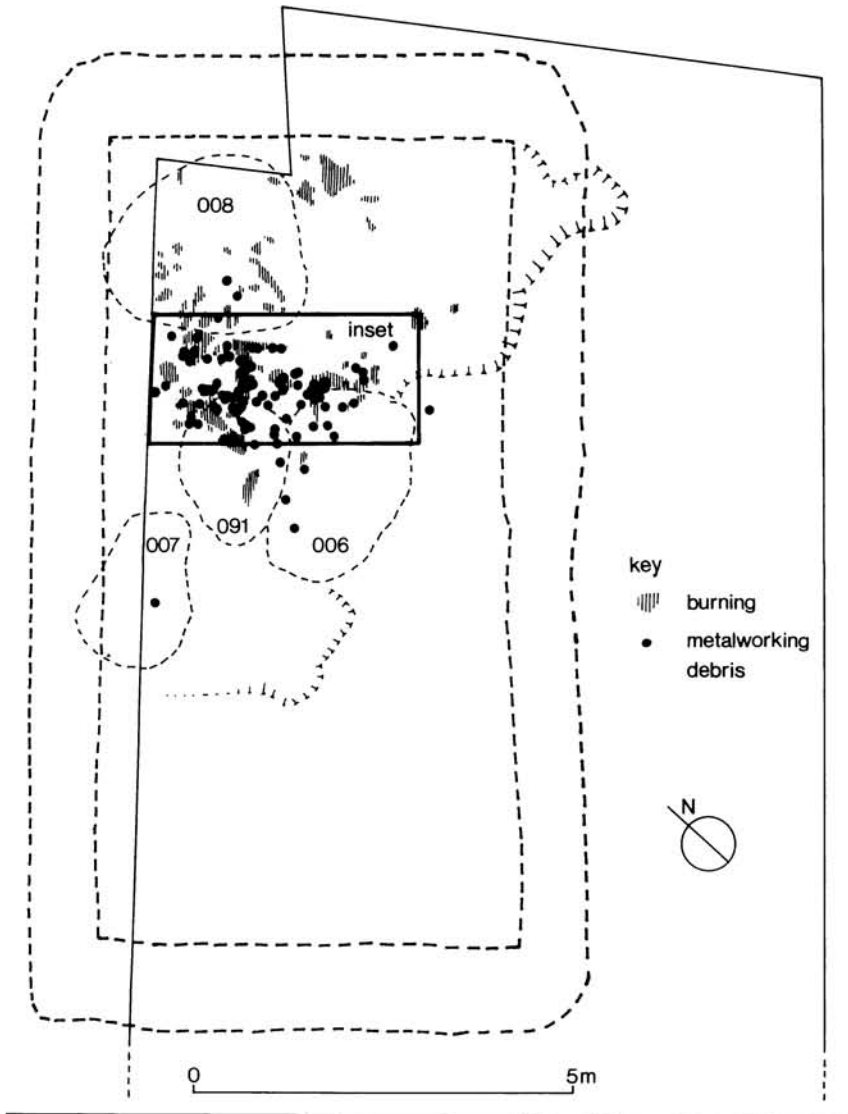
Two further determinations relate to the postulated collapse of the roof of the building, through the floor of which the hearths were dug.

CAR-905	roof collapse (054): ad 1230 ± 70	A.D. 1164-1388
CAR-906	roof collapse (054): ad 1170 ± 120	

The stratigraphic relationship of the metalworking hearths to the collapse of the roof of the building has been destroyed by quarrying for later field walls and by

FIG. 9

Only the bases of the metalworking hearths survive. Metalworking debris, occurring mainly in redeposited contexts, nevertheless indicates where metalworking was concentrated. The plan shows this in relation to the pre-existing house and the areas of later disturbance



20th-century treasure hunting. It could not, therefore, be established whether the metalworking took place within a structure that was still roofed or not. The radiocarbon evidence suggests that domestic occupation gave way to metalworking during the 11th or 12th century and that perhaps the building was finally abandoned during the 12th or 13th century.

PHASE 5 (Figs. 8 and 9)

During this phase, much of the floor surface of the house and the upper part of the metalworking hearths were removed in two main disturbances. The first occurred during the late 18th or 19th century when rampart material had accumulated against the ruinous S. wall of the house to its surviving height of around 1 m and had spilled into the interior, leaving only a single course of stones visible. A large amount of debris was cleared from the interior to below the level of the house floor, leaving only pockets of stratigraphy intact — against the N. wall and over a slightly larger area in the lee of the S. wall. It is reasonably certain that this activity was part of a process which redefined the field banks in the area. By 1769 the headland was a

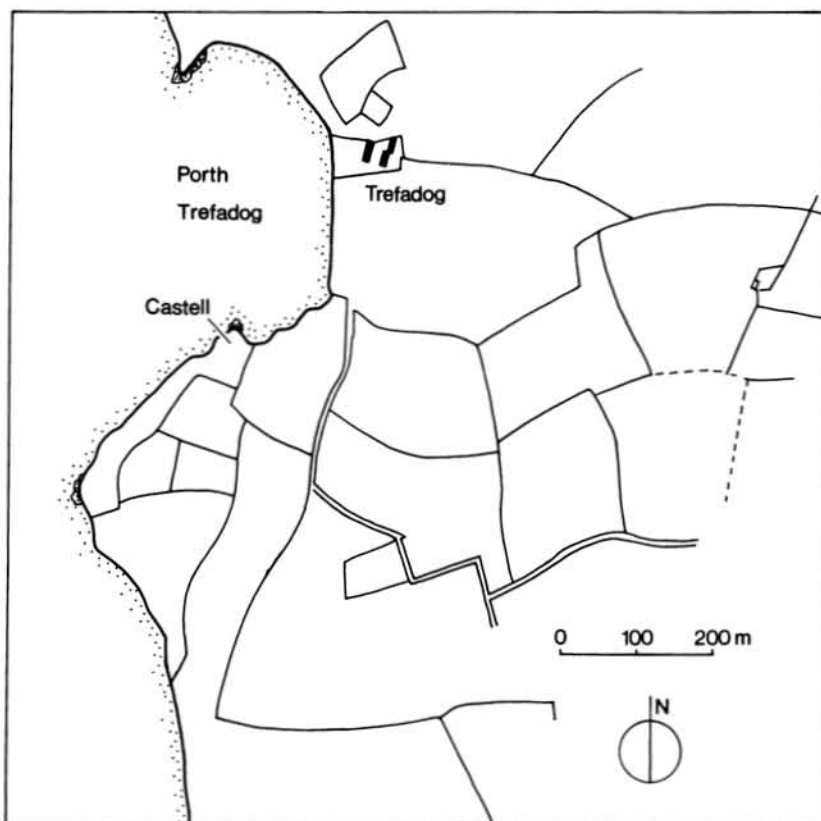


FIG. 10  
Extract from 1769 estate survey



patchwork of small fields almost exactly corresponding to the present arrangement, but the promontory itself appears not to have been enclosed (Fig. 10).<sup>6</sup> However, the late 18th or early 19th century saw the realignment of nearby fields and the enclosure of the promontory with a field bank following the line of the W. and N. walls of the house. This bank now sits precariously on the cliff edge, seriously undermined by erosion. The bank-building episode led to renewed erosion of the rampart, sealing the S. wall of the house. The robbing of stone from the W. and N. walls followed.

The second disturbance is more recent and may correspond to a local memory of digging for treasure on the site during the early 1970s. Four large holes (006, 007, 008, 091), dug and backfilled in succession, were recognized within the excavated area (Fig. 9). A fifth hole, of apparently similar character, lay just outside it. The holes are up to 2 m across and, at a maximum depth of 0.8 m, have thoroughly disturbed much of the site's stratigraphy.

#### *Unassociated features*

A small number of features — pits, post-holes and slots — could not be assigned with certainty to any particular phase. Information on these is retained in the archive.

### THE FINDS

Metalworking debris, burnt clay and slag, has been redeposited through contexts associated with later disturbances in the interior of the site. The concentration of such finds, plotted in Figs. 8 and 9, nevertheless indicates the focus of metalworking. Other significant artefacts are catalogued according to their position in the stratigraphic sequence.

#### CATALOGUE OF FINDS (Fig. 11)

##### *Original ground surface outside area of house (094)*

- 151a. Incomplete twisted iron loop, 30 mm across, cross-section diameter 5 mm.
- 151b. Small iron plate, 17 mm × 9 mm, incomplete with flat hooked projection.
- 151c. Iron strip with looped over and welded head, and rectangular cross-section, 7 mm × 4 mm. Incomplete; extant length 43 mm. Possibly a small lynch-pin.

##### *Stone paving at door of house (075)*

- 142. Bronze pin with circular cross-section 2 mm diameter, one end bent and flattened. Incomplete; extant length 25 mm.

##### *Floor surface of house (063)*

- 136. Two iron 'brad'-type nails, incomplete. Not illustrated.
- 011. Whetstone, fine-grained elongated beach pebble of oval, 32 mm × 22 mm, cross-section. Incomplete; extant length 120 mm.

##### *On phase 1 ground surface or in tumble of rampart B*

- 138. Small fragment of flat mould-blown green glass, 35 mm × 22 mm × 4 mm. Not illustrated.

##### *Decay of house*

- 125. (062) Iron 'brad' type nail. Not illustrated.
- 92, 104, 123, 129. (062) Four iron nails. Not illustrated.
- 106. (054) Iron ferrule, incomplete, tapering with blunt end, replaced hardwood inside.



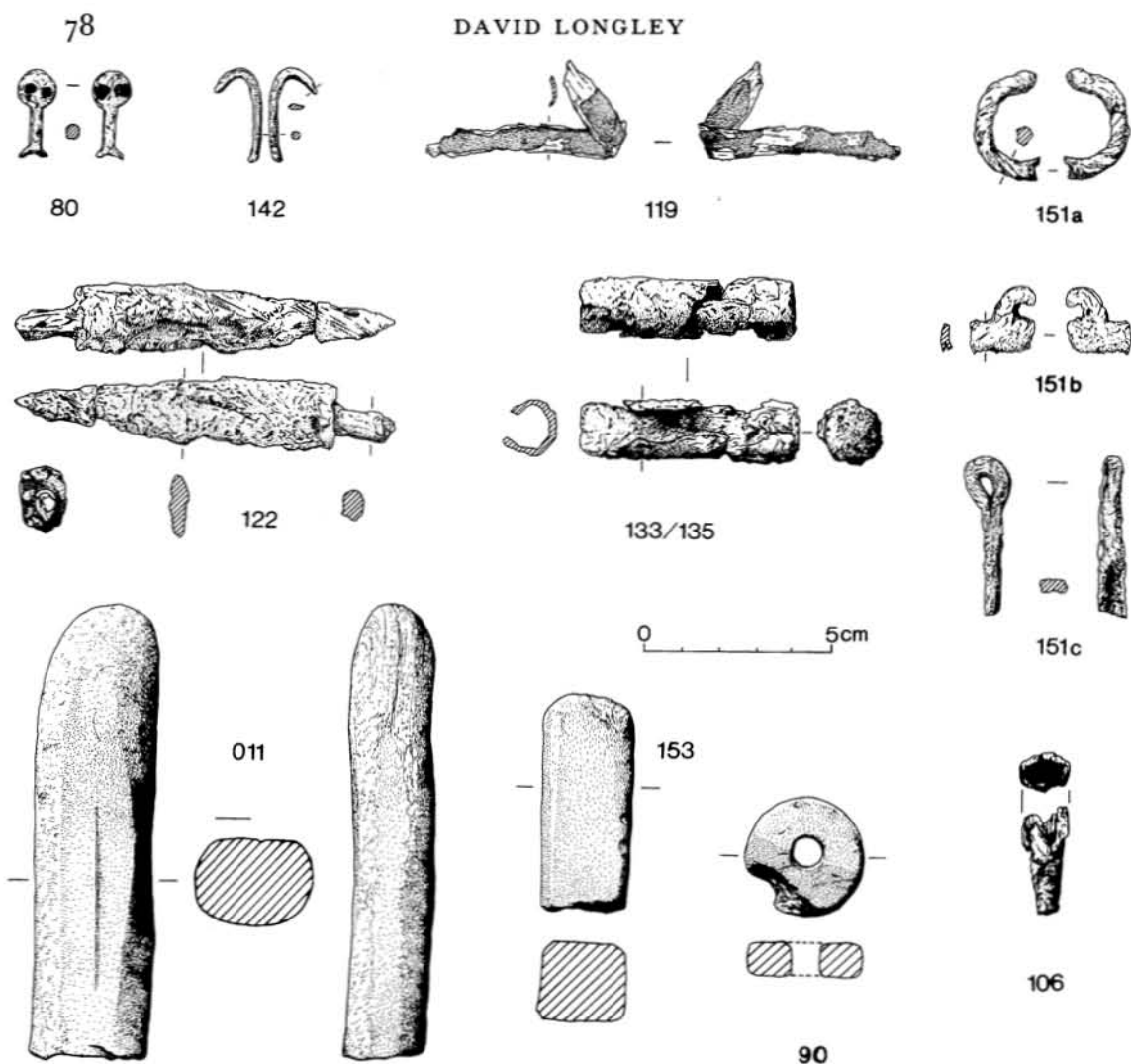


FIG. 11  
Artefacts of copper alloy, iron and stone

Maximum diameter 13 mm; extant length 28 mm.

122. (054) Iron knife in three fragments, tang incomplete. Replaced remains of wooden ?scabbard on blade, replaced organic remains of handle on tang. Length of blade 86 mm.

90. (046) Red siltstone spindlewhorl, damaged, Diameter 31 mm, thickness 8 mm, diameter of perforation 10 mm.

105. (043) Rim sherd of ?South Gaulish samian bowl. Not illustrated.

*Metalworking hearth (061)*

120. Grey coarse ware body sherd, probably Romano-British. Not illustrated.

*Post-medieval disturbance (060, 058, 034, 017) and humic topsoil (014, 011, 002)*

36, 85, 103. Three iron nails. Not illustrated.

133, 135. Iron ?ferrule of tubular cross-section, 15 mm diameter, with blocked end.

Internally coated with copper alloy. Incomplete; extant length 59 mm.

80. Copper alloy disk, 10 mm in diameter and 3.5 mm thick, with rectangular sectioned shaft, 3.5 mm × 4 mm, projecting 11 mm before expanding into a broken loop of unknown dimensions. The disk is pierced by two iron rivets. A fastener of unknown function.

153. Whetstone. Fine-grained, square-sectioned (20 × 22 mm), some faceting on angles. Incomplete; extant length 56 mm.

3. Base sherd of very coarse pottery vessel. Soapy fabric, orange-brown outer face with black core. Not illustrated.

Other finds are described in the site archive.

## DISCUSSION

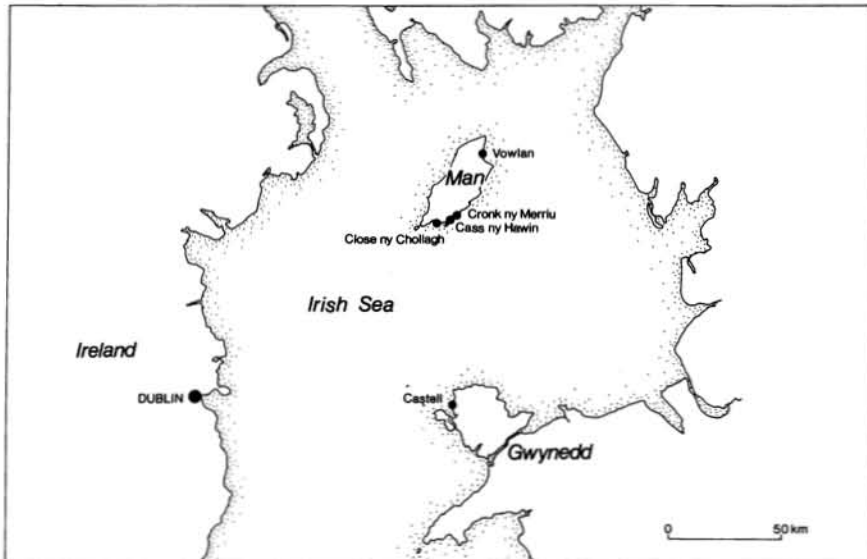
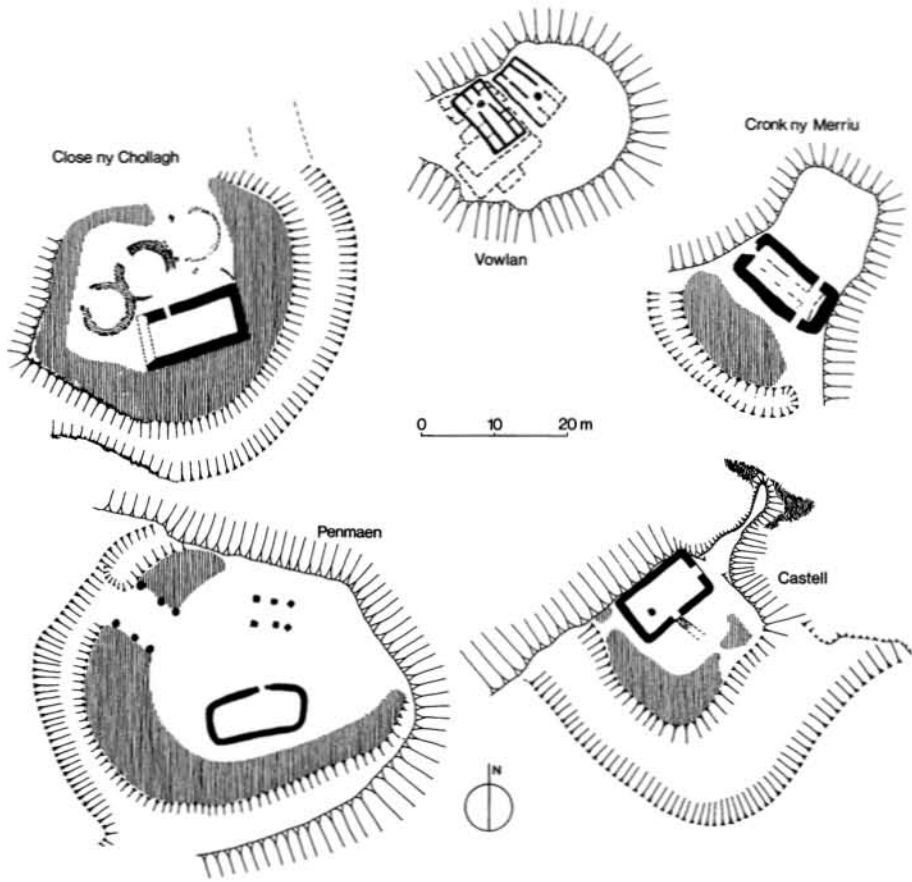
### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

There are few periods in Anglesey's history or prehistory that can be considered without reference to the island's geographical position in the Irish Sea. The 11th, 12th and 13th centuries are no exception. With the establishment of Viking control in Dublin, the Norse connection was to play a vital role in the development of the fortunes of both Anglesey and the kingdom of Gwynedd. The cessation of Viking raids at the end of the 10th century introduced a period when alliances between the Gwynedd dynasty and the Norse rulers of Dublin and Man were to significantly affect the outcome of events.<sup>7</sup>

The latter part of Gruffydd ap Cyнан's long reign (d. 1137) was characterized by peace and prosperity, but as he sought to establish himself he was forced to contend with Norman expansion into North Wales under Hugh of Chester. Gruffydd was half-Norse and his succession in 1075 had been achieved with the aid of Norse mercenaries. In 1094 he was successful, in alliance with the king of Man, in taking the motte at Aberlleiniog and expelling the Normans, 'delivering Gwynedd from castles' as his biographer tells us.<sup>8</sup>

The Normans responded in 1098 and Gruffydd was forced on the defensive. Despite calling on Norse assistance once again, Anglesey was overrun and Gruffydd fled to Dublin. Only the timely and not entirely coincidental appearance of Magnus Barlegs' fleet en route from the Isle of Man retrieved the situation in Gruffydd's favour.<sup>9</sup>

Direct Norman involvement on Anglesey ceased from that time until the campaigns of Henry III when the island was ravaged by a force from Dublin in 1244. A century earlier Henry II's fleet had been defeated at Tal Moelfre and it is unlikely that the Normans had secured much of a foothold on the island beyond Aberlleiniog prior to the 13th century. But there were domestic disturbances too. The struggle for the succession to the kingdom of Gwynedd affected Anglesey many times during the 11th and 12th centuries. In 1076 the Norse mercenaries of Gruffydd ap Cyнан plundered the island and in 1193 the king of Man helped Rhodri ab Owain Gwynedd retake Anglesey for a brief period, an occasion remembered as 'Haf y Gwyddyl' — the summer of the Irishmen.<sup>10</sup> The contest between the descendants of Owain Gwynedd saw Dafydd gain control of Anglesey at one stage and be styled by the poet, Gwilym Rhyfel, 'king of Cemais'. Cemais was the maenor of which the township of Trefadog was a part.<sup>11</sup>



The basic unit of settlement in medieval Wales was the *tref* (township) with its dependent hamlets.<sup>12</sup> In the mid 14th century the township of Trefadog, with the hamlet of Coeden, comprised three free *gwelyau* (kindred-group holdings).<sup>13</sup> These were the Gwely Cuhelyn ap Cadrod, Gwely Gwythur ap Cadrod and Gwely Llywelyn ap Caswallon. Cadrod Hardd, the father of Cuhelyn and Gwythur, had flourished in Bodafon township during the mid 12th century.<sup>14</sup> The establishment of *gwelyau* by the sons of Cadrod Hardd in Trefadog during the latter part of that century would conform to the pattern of settlement expansion on Anglesey, coinciding with population growth, during the 12th and 13th centuries. Many *gwely* names stem from this period.<sup>15</sup>

A lease of the late 16th century refers to a 'bovate in vill of Trevadok called y gladlys' (*sic*).<sup>16</sup> Cadlys is a common term for a defensive earthwork enclosure and in this instance the dilapidated Castell may be meant.

#### FORTIFICATION OF CASTELL: POSSIBLE CAUSES

##### *Local initiative*

The history of Castell could be explained entirely in terms of local development. The first phase of the defence of the promontory might well fall within the Iron Age and Roman periods although the evidence is admittedly slight, comprising two sherds of Roman pottery in secondary contexts. There are several promontory and coastal forts along Gwynedd's extensive coastline. They range in size from 18 acres at Dinas Gynfor, Llanbadrig,<sup>17</sup> to 0.03 acre at Pared Mawr, Llanengan.<sup>18</sup> Defences may combine natural features with artificial banks of boulder clay at Dinas Dinlle, Llandwrog, or stone at Dinas Gynfor.<sup>19</sup> None have been adequately excavated and in default of evidence to the contrary they are all assumed to have had Iron Age origins. Some, like the 1.8 acre fort at Porth Ruffydd, Holyhead, the 5 acre fort at Dinas Dinlle,<sup>20</sup> Llandwrog or the 10 acre fort at Tywyn y Parc, Llangadwaladr,<sup>21</sup> have produced small amounts of Roman pottery, metalwork or coins from unassociated contexts. In addition, of the eleven possible inland or coastal forts of supposed Iron Age origin on Anglesey, seven have produced Roman material of some form.<sup>22</sup> While it may be presumed that these finds are indicative of continued occupation during the Roman centuries, in no case can this be shown to relate to the maintenance of the defences. At Caer y Twr, Holyhead, furthermore, the coins from the area of the late Roman signal station are demonstrably not associated with the occupation of the hillfort.<sup>23</sup> An Iron Age origin is suggested for the phase 1 fortification of the Porth Trefadog promontory, therefore, but not proved.

The denuded first phase defences were so completely remodelled in phases 2 and 3 that structural continuity cannot be argued; refortification could have occurred at any time subsequently. Rectangular houses with hearths set towards one end were in use in Gwynedd at the Graeanog 'homestead' between the 3rd and 6th centuries A.D. and at the Graeanog 'medieval farmstead' between the 11th and 13th centuries A.D.<sup>24</sup> If, however, the site is a native fortification, then it must be asked

FIG. 12

Promontory forts in Wales and the Isle of Man; comparative plans

what social context gave rise to such a medieval earthwork. In the post-Roman, pre-Norman period Gwynedd did have fortifications — Deganwy is described as *arx* in the early 9th century<sup>25</sup> — but the character of their defences remains uncertain.<sup>26</sup> The ditch at Aberffraw and the dry stone ramparts at Dinas Emrys are as yet probable rather than certain examples<sup>27</sup> while there has never been any real evidence to support a Dark Age chronology for Carreg-y-Llam and the small fort on Garn Boduan.<sup>28</sup> Within early medieval Gwynedd perhaps only royal townships and *maerdrefi* contained fortifications — legal and practical political considerations should dictate such things — or, following an apparently Irish model, might it be legally possible for other members of the highest grades in society to construct a fortification around their residence?<sup>29</sup> We have no evidence for the latter in Gwynedd. If, on the other hand, it is a royal site, we have no documentation of its role and Porth Trefadog is a long way from the *maerdref* of the commote at Cemais. Nevertheless, the construction of the rampart and ditch at Castell would have required the utilization of considerable resources and implies that the site is one of high status.

#### *Norman influence*

It might be argued that Norman influence in the area was responsible for the construction of such a fortification. Castell undoubtedly has the appearance of a Norman ringwork, as its inclusion on the latest map of such monuments demonstrates.<sup>30</sup> The morphologically and locationally similar coastal earthwork of Castle Tower, Penmaen, in the Gower peninsula has been interpreted as a Norman fortification of the 12th and early 13th centuries and it has been suggested that the original Norman work came under Welsh control during the early 13th century when a rectangular 'hall' of similar dimensions to the Trefadog house may have been built to replace timber structures.<sup>31</sup>

The Normans certainly built fortifications in Gwynedd, during the latter part of the 11th century, although demonstrable mottes or ringworks are lacking from Anglesey beyond Aberlleiniog on the Menai Straits. The ringwork at Castell Crwn, Llanrhwydrys, four miles to the north-east of Trefadog, has, at times, been thought to be Norman but there is no evidence for this.<sup>32</sup> The Welsh were ultimately successful, with the Norse assistance, in repelling Norman incursions and, as his biographer tells us, Gruffydd ap Cynan 'delivered Gwynedd from [Norman] castles'.<sup>33</sup>

#### *Norse fortification*

A third possible context for the refortification of Castell is provided by Norse activity on the Irish Sea coastline. Gruffydd ap Cynan's maternal grandfather, Olaf, was a Dublin Viking. He is even credited with the creation of a fortification in Gwynedd, which could later be described as a castle, sometime around the year 1000 A.D. This was 'Olaf's Castle or Castell Bon y Dom'.<sup>34</sup> Hogg argued that the location of 'Bon y Dom' was to be sought in Llanidan parish at Castell Bryn Gwyn<sup>35</sup> though another interpretation of the locational and place-name evidence might

suggest 'Dinas', Y Felinheli, as a more plausible alternative, on the Arfon side of the Menai Straits where the Moel y Don (earlier Bon y Don) ferry crossed from Anglesey.<sup>36</sup> The possibility that there are other Norse fortifications in Gwynedd, and that Castell, Porth Trefadog, is of Norse origin must, therefore, be considered. Direct evidence for Norse settlement in Gwynedd is scarce but there are a number of place-names — mostly of coastal features — and a handful of unassociated finds.<sup>37</sup> Anglesey was hit by Viking raids during the 10th century and perhaps more significantly Norsemen from Dublin and Man on more than one occasion aided the kings of Gwynedd in their internal power struggles and against external oppression during the 11th and 12th centuries.

The Isle of Man has a large number of coastal promontory forts, the majority of which are very small indeed. They have been assumed to be of Iron Age origin; nevertheless, all four excavated examples were occupied in the Middle Ages and three of these, at least, show evidence of more than one phase of bank construction.<sup>38</sup> At Cronk ny Merriu,<sup>39</sup> structurally and locationally similar to Castell, a Norse-type house was built within the defences after the revetment of the second-phase rampart had collapsed. There is no evidence that this Norse occupation was accompanied by any refurbishing of the bank which would, nevertheless, have provided a measure of protection. At Close ny Chollagh<sup>40</sup> a rectangular house which seemed to the excavator to be 'an ultimate reflection of Norse building traditions' was set into the back of a decaying second-phase rampart; round houses were associated with the earlier defences. Again at Close ny Chollagh the surviving rampart would have been capable of providing some protection. Cass ny Hawin<sup>41</sup> also saw reoccupation, with the construction of a rectangular aisled house of Norse type within the earlier defences. Therefore, promontory fortifications on the Isle of Man, morphologically comparable with Castell, were evolving and seeing re-use during the Norse period and without reference to any Norman inspiration. Two significant distinctions must be made, however. At Castell the second- and third-phase defences are unquestionably contemporary with the construction and re-use of the house. On the Isle of Man, while it might be thought probable that the ramparts were recommissioned, this cannot be demonstrated. Whilst the Castell house is rectangular, it lacks evidence for aisles or benches which characterize the Manx Norse houses. Nevertheless, in view of the similarities of structure, scale and siting, the possibility of a Norse component in the later development of Castell must be considered.

#### CONCLUSIONS

Three options appear to present themselves for consideration as possible contexts for the later defended phases and occupation of the Porth Trefadog promontory. They are:

1. All phases of fortification are of local derivation.
2. The site is a Norman ringwork.
3. The site is a Norse foundation comparable with the Norse-occupied promontory forts of the Isle of Man.



The argument in favour of seeing the refortification of Castell as the work of a Welsh lord on the troubled coastline of north-west Anglesey would be strengthened if it could be demonstrated that the construction of fortifications unassociated with *maerdrefi* was feasible in a local context. The possibility of direct Norman involvement is dismissed. It is conceivable that the Norman earthwork castle building tradition provided the inspiration for a local response, but the 'ringwork' form is extremely rare in North Wales and so derivation from Norman prototypes is unlikely.

Viking raids hit Anglesey on a number of occasions during the 10th century but it seems unlikely that a freebooter could have carved such a niche for himself out of the Anglesey coastline. This is not an instance of someone simply making use of an existing defence on a coastal promontory with convenient beaching facilities for boats. Neither is it on a scale commensurate with the 'taking of a ness' and the overwintering of an army. The house is a solid permanent structure and the defences were refurbished on at least one occasion. It does not seem possible that the settlement could have been effected illegally and without drawing on local resources. On the other hand, if Norse influence is apparent in the situation and character of the house and its earthwork then a further possible context might be sought in the aid which Dublin and Man rendered to the kings of Gwynedd during the 11th and 12th centuries. A land grant on the Anglesey coast to a Manx or Dublin Viking together with the rents of certain townships in return for services rendered might well have provided the impetus for the reoccupation of Castell and it is this interpretation which is favoured here.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments in Wales (henceforth R.C.A.H.M.W.), *Anglesey Inv.* (1937), 68–69.

<sup>2</sup> Castle Tower, Penmaen: L. Alcock, 'Castle Tower, Penmaen, a Norman ringwork in Glamorgan', *Antiq. J.*, 46 (1966), 178–210; Pared Mawr, Llyn: R.C.A.H.M.W., *Caernarvonshire Inv.* 3 (1964), 51–52; Burton Point, Wirral: *Victoria County History of Cheshire*, 1, 109–10; Boydston, Ayr: J. Smith, *Prehistoric Man in Ayrshire* (1895), 11; Cronk ny Merriu, Isle of Man: P. Gelling, 'Cronk ny Merriu', *Proc. Isle of Man Natur. Hist. Antiq. Soc.*, 5.3 (1952), 307–15.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Alcock, *op. cit.* in note 2, 179.

<sup>4</sup> Cronk ny Merriu has an end door (Gelling *op. cit.* in note 2).

<sup>5</sup> Particularly disastrous inundations of storm-blown sand on the W. Coast of Anglesey are recorded during the 14th century: A. D. Carr, *Medieval Anglesey* (Llangefni, 1982), 23–24.

- <sup>6</sup> Penrhos, Bodewryd and Bodwinen estate maps, 1769, University College North Wales archives, Bangor.
- <sup>7</sup> The political events of the 12th and 13th centuries are summarized in Carr, *op. cit.* in note 5, 40–58.
- <sup>8</sup> D. Simon Evans, *Historia Gruffud vab Kenan* (Cardiff, 1977), 20–21.
- <sup>9</sup> T. Jones (ed.), *Brut y Tywysogion* (Cardiff, 1955).
- <sup>10</sup> Carr, *op. cit.* in note 5, 46.
- <sup>11</sup> A. D. Carr, 'The Extent of Anglesey 1352', *Trans. Anglesey Antiq. Soc.* (1971–72), 195.
- <sup>12</sup> G. R. J. Jones, 'Post-Roman Wales' 299 ff. in H. P. R. Finberg (ed.), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales, 1.2, AD 43–1072* (Cambridge, 1972).
- <sup>13</sup> Carr, *op. cit.* in note 11, 195–96.
- <sup>14</sup> T. Jones Pierce, 'Medieval Settlement in Anglesey', *Trans. Anglesey Antiq. Soc.*, 1951, 6–7.
- <sup>15</sup> Carr, *op. cit.* in note 5.
- <sup>16</sup> E. A. Lewis and J. Conway Davies, *Records of the Court of Augmentations relating to Wales and Monmouthshire* (Cardiff, 1954), 179.
- <sup>17</sup> R.C.A.H.M.W., *op. cit.* in note 1, 37 (3).
- <sup>18</sup> R.C.A.H.M.W., *op. cit.* in note 2, 51–52.
- <sup>19</sup> Dinas Dinlle, Llandwrog: R.C.A.H.M.W., *Caerns. Inv.* 2 (1960), 189–90. Dinas Gynfor, Llanbadrig: R.C.A.H.M.W., *op. cit.* in note 1, 37 (3).
- <sup>20</sup> Porth Ruffydd, Holyhead: R.C.A.H.M.W., *op. cit.* in note 1, 24 (15). Dinas Dinlle, Llandwrog: *op. cit.* in note 19.
- <sup>21</sup> Tywyn y Parc, Llangadwaladr: *op. cit.* in note 1, 87 (4).
- <sup>22</sup> Castell Bryn Gwyn, Llanidan (1st-century pottery in latest remodelling of enclosure bank): G. J. Wainwright, 'The Excavation of an Earthwork at Castell Bryn-Gwyn, Llanidan Parish, Anglesey', *Archaeol. Cambriensis*, 91 (1962), 25–58; Caer y Twr, Holyhead (Roman pottery and 4th-century coins in immediate vicinity of late Roman signal station): P. Crew, *Archaeol. in Wales*, 21 (1981), 35–36; Din Silwy, Llanfihangel Din Silwy (1st–4th century coins, 3rd–4th century pottery and metalwork: R.C.A.H.M.W., *op. cit.* in note 1, 83 (2); Parciau, Llaneugrad (glass beads, box flue tiles, pottery, late 3rd–4th century coins): R.C.A.H.M.W., *ibid.*, 63 (3); Porth Ruffydd, Holyhead (pottery, coins metalwork): J. Ellis-Jones, 'Two Romano-British bronze oxhead bucket-handle mounts from Dinas Holyhead', *Trans. Anglesey Antiq. Soc.*, 1987, 19–26; Tywyn y Parc, Llangadwaladr (3rd–4th century pottery): W. E. Griffith, 'Topographical list of Roman Remains in North Wales', *Bull. Board of Celtic Studies*, 12 (1948), 108–22; Castell, Porth Trefadog (two sherds Roman pottery — see this excavation report).
- <sup>23</sup> P. Crew, *op. cit.* in note 22.
- <sup>24</sup> R. Kelly, 'The excavation of an enclosed homestead at Graeanog, Clynnog, Gwynedd', forthcoming; P. Kelly, 'The excavation of a medieval farmstead at Cefn Graeanog, Clynnog, Gwynedd', *Bull. Board of Celtic Studies*, 39 (1982), 859–908.
- <sup>25</sup> *Annales Cambriae* s.a. 812, 822.
- <sup>26</sup> L. Alcock, 'Excavations at Degannwy Castle', *Archaeol. J.*, 124 (1967), 190–201.
- <sup>27</sup> N. Edwards and A. Lane, *Early Medieval Settlements in Wales AD 400–1100*, University College North Wales, Bangor, University College Cardiff (1988), 18–21, 54–57.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 39, 71.
- <sup>29</sup> E. MacNeill, 'The Law of Status or Franchise', *Proc. Roy. Irish Acad.*, 36C (1923), 305. D. A. Binchy, *Crith Gablach* (Dublin, 1970), 22.
- <sup>30</sup> C. J. Spurgeon, 'Mottes and castle-ringworks in Wales', in J. R. Kenyon and R. Avent (eds.), *Castles in Wales and the Marches* (Cardiff, 1987), fig. 2.
- <sup>31</sup> Alcock, *op. cit.* in note 2.
- <sup>32</sup> R.C.A.H.M.W., *op. cit.* in note 1, 108 (2).
- <sup>33</sup> D. Simon Evans, *op. cit.* in note 8, 20–21.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.
- <sup>35</sup> A. H. A. Hogg, 'King Olaf's Castle?', *Archaeol. Cambriensis*, 91 (1962), 56–58.
- <sup>36</sup> Here a low rampart encloses the base of a natural rise on the banks of the Menai on its landward side. 'Castell Bon y Dom' means 'the castle of the base of the mound'.
- <sup>37</sup> N. Edwards, 'A possible Viking Grave from Benllech', *Trans. Anglesey Antiq. Soc.*, 1985, 19–24.
- <sup>38</sup> The fourth, Vowlan, has lost its bank: G. Bersu, 'A Promontory Fort on the Shore of Ramsey Bay', *Antiq. J.* 39 (1949), 62–79.
- <sup>39</sup> P. Gelling, *op. cit.* in note 2.
- <sup>40</sup> P. Gelling, 'Close ny Chollagh' *Proc. Prehist. Soc.*, 24 (1958), 85–100.
- <sup>41</sup> P. Gelling, 'Cass ny Hawin', *Isle of Man Nat. Hist. Antiq. Soc.*, 6.1 (1959), 28–38.

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