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BRITHDIR

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF (G1373)

G1379

REPORT NO. 197

Ymddiriedolaeth Archaeolegol Gwynedd
Gwynedd Archaeological Trust

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prepared for Dwr Cymru/Welsh Water

by D. Hopewell

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12th March 1996

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Prepared for Dwr Cymru/Welsh Water

1. PROJECT BACKGROUND

Welsh water have laid a new water main in Brithdir along the road from Garth Isaf, running in a westerly direction, to the junction with the B4416 and then as far as the entrance to Ty Nant to the north. The new water main was laid in a trench alongside the existing pipe. As it was known to pass through the southern corner of Brithdir Roman fortlet and its associated Roman industrial and military complex, an archaeological watching brief was recommended by Gwynedd Archaeological Planning Service.

Gwynedd Archaeological Trust (Contracts section) submitted a project design and costs for carrying out the work. These were accepted and a watching brief was carried out at appropriate times between the 6th and 16th February 1996.

2. ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The road to the west of Garth Isaf follows the line of the Roman road from Caer Gai 17km to the north-east and then cuts through the southern corner of the Roman fortlet discovered by J.K.S. St Joseph in 1961. The fortlet stands at a height of 165m OD, on a natural shelf 120m above the river Wnion, in a field known as Cae'r Fynwent (Graveyard Field) and is represented by plough-damaged ramparts forming a 54m square platform.

In 1966 fragments of Roman pottery, brick and floor tiles were recovered during the construction of council houses just to the south-east of the fortlet. The remains of a buried dry-stone wall were also recorded (Dancer, 1968 and White, 1978).

In 1974 J.L. Davies discovered large quantities of *opus signinum* flooring, broken bricks, charcoal and burnt stones in the spoil heaps from the foundations of a bungalow which was nearing completion in plot 4. These finds were interpreted as being indicative of a bath building (Davis, 1975).

Excavations were carried by Gwynedd Archaeological Trust in 1974/5 in plots 3 and 5 (White, 1978). A site of some complexity was identified comprising four phases of Roman industrial and military activity dating from AD 70 to AD 130.

Further excavations by G.A.T in 1991 revealed a military ditch and other remains from early in the fort's history in plot 1. A geophysical survey was subsequently carried out which showed extensive Roman activity to the west of the fortlet (Hopewell, forthcoming).

The results of the above excavations and geophysical work are summarised in Fig. 2. This shows the (as yet unexcavated and undated fortlet) and associated remains. The industrial activity was recorded in plot 5, the bath house in plot 4 and various features including a road constructed in AD 130 were recorded in plot 3. A large polygonal enclosure can be seen to the west of the fort which is bounded by a military ditch; possibly a continuation of the ditch excavated in plot 1.

The excavation and survey outlined above have been subject to the constraints imposed by rescue archaeology and have therefore failed to produce a complete picture of the site. Any further information that could be uncovered during the watching brief would be valuable but there are a number of specific questions about the phasing and function of the site that could be addressed.

The military ditch in plot 1 was observed to terminate about 12.5m from the road. A possible continuation of this ditch was detected during the geophysical survey of the field to the west of the fortlet. This suggests that there is a gap in the defences at this point, perhaps forming a gateway into the defensive enclosure. It was therefore expected that further information would be uncovered during the watching brief. Ditches were also identified in plots 3 and 5 one of which was tentatively interpreted as the fortlet ditch. The depth of this ditch was not known but it was hoped that it could be detected in the pipe trench.

3. METHODOLOGY

A continuous watching brief was carried out while the pipe trench was being excavated. Both sections were then hand cleaned in order to identify any features cut by the trench. Remains of archaeological interest were recorded as hand drawn sections at a scale of 1:10. Detail written descriptions were made of all features. A photographic record, taken on both monochrome film and colour slide film, was kept. This method of recording was of limited use however, as the trench was too narrow to allow accurate images at close to 90° to the section to be taken.

4. RESULTS OF THE WATCHING BRIEF

A watching brief was carried out along 80m of the pipeline. The area where the road cuts through the fortlet was not monitored as the road is cut through the earthwork to a depth of over 2m and it was unlikely that any information could be obtained at this level.

The road surface typically consisted of a 0.15m depth of tarmac. This was laid directly onto either the hard clayey subsoil or between 0.1m and 0.3m of compacted modern rubble. A further layer, with a maximum depth of 0.1m, of brown silty clay was identified beneath the rubble (see sample section, Fig. 3). This context could be traced for about 6m before petering out. Two conjoining sherds of Samian ware were recovered from this context. The context was only present in the south facing section and was somewhat mixed. This could represent the bottom of a Roman feature (about 1.0 to 1.5m below ground level) but it gave the impression of being a lens of redeposited soil presumably associated with the construction of the present road. No further deposits were present between the road and the subsoil. A careful watch was kept at the point where the continuation of the Roman military ditch was expected to be found in the trench. Unfortunately the sewer serving the nearby houses passes under the road at this point. The disturbance caused by this was however limited to a neatly cut straight sided trench, about 0.6m across, running at 90° to the line of the pipe trench. The Roman ditch was expected to cut the trench at an angle of about 65°. It was therefore very unlikely that the expected return of the ditch was masked by the sewer in both sides of the trench. This can be taken as evidence that there was no ditch present at this point.

5. DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

There were no *in situ* deposits identified during the watching brief that could be definitely assigned to the Roman period. This was in part due to the level of the road and pipe trench being a minimum of 0.6m below the surrounding ground surface, thus making the discovery of slight features unlikely.

The sherds of pottery recovered from the buried soil horizon were imported South Gaulish samian ware, probably dating from the late first or early second century AD. Their presence in redeposited soil is a further indication of the already proven Roman presence in the area at this time.

As the military ditch did not appear in the trench it can be deduced that there is a break of at least 16m in the defences at this point. The excavations in plot 1 (Hopewell, forthcoming) revealed no major fortifications apart from the military ditch. This and the evidence from the

watching brief suggests that there was a very wide and poorly defended gap in the defences, casting some doubt as to the effectiveness of the polygonal enclosure as a military feature. It is possible that this area of the defences was abandoned before completion or was a temporary annex to a more permanent fortification.

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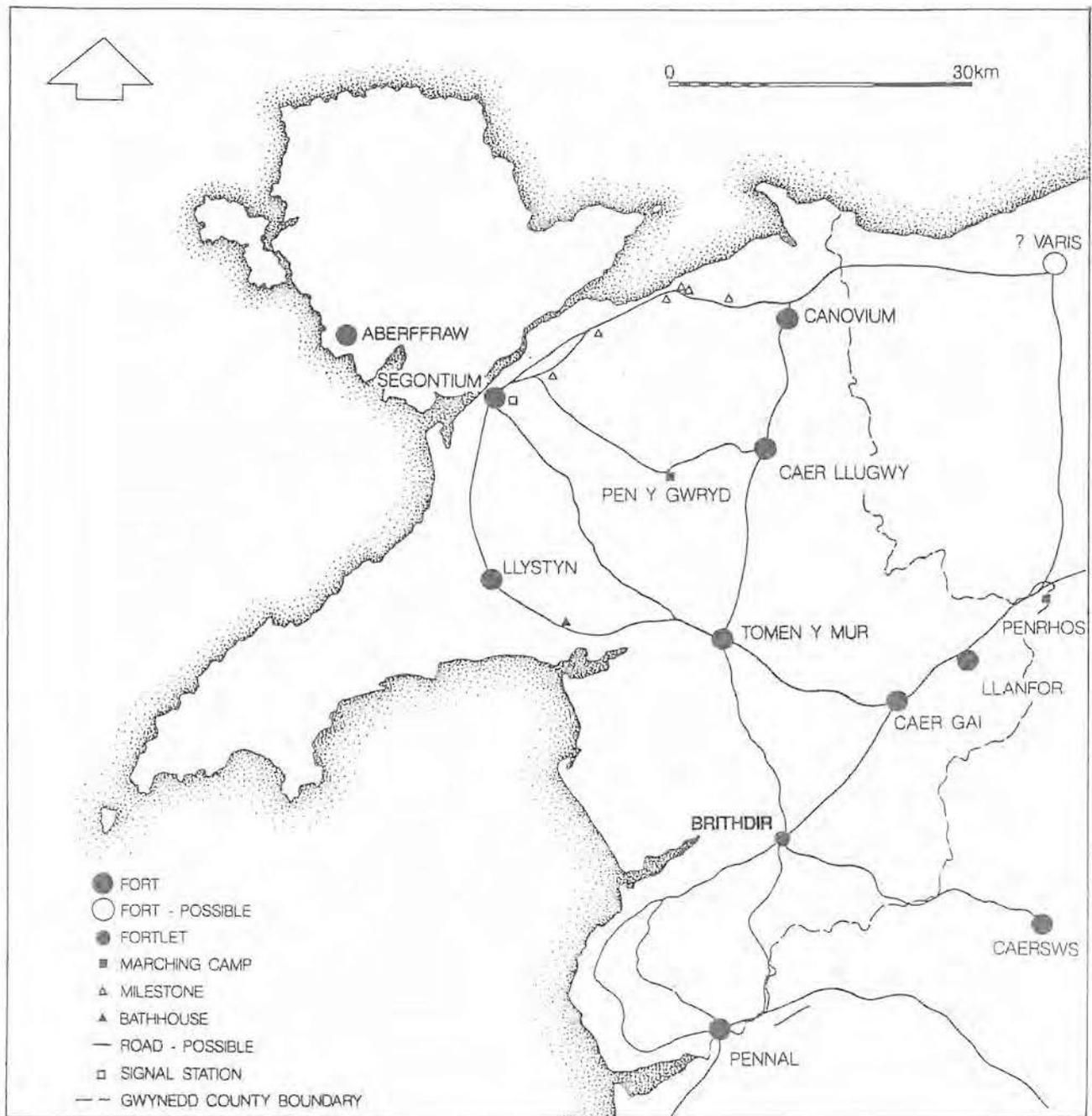


Fig. 1 Location map - showing known sites & roads of the Roman period.

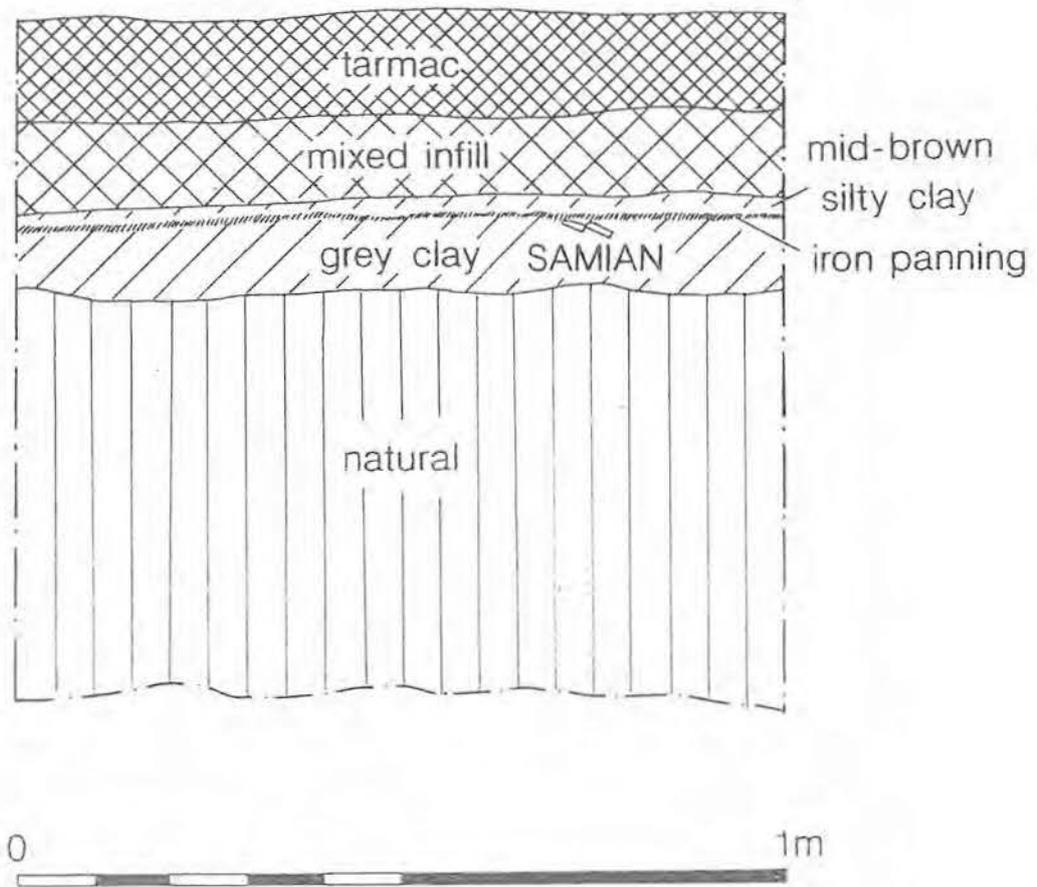


Fig. 3 Detail of sample section A.

