

CLWYD-POWYS ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

# newsletter



Spring 2008

# Timber circles and henge in the Tanat valley

Following the success of the work on the Dyffryn Lane henge monument last year (see our Spring 2007 *Newsletter*) work was undertaken on a second enigmatic complex of prehistoric funerary and ritual monuments, this time in the Tanat valley, just to the south of Llanrhaeadr-ym-Mochnant.

One of the best known sites in the area is the impressive Maes Mochnant standing stone, also known as *Post y wiber* ('Serpent's Pillar'), which is a rich source of local legend. It was only in the 1960s that a number of sites were identified from the air suggesting that the standing stone might form part of a much more extensive prehistoric ritual landscape on the floor of the valley. A matter of only 500 metres to the north-west of the standing stone two timber circles about 100 metres apart were spotted from cropmarks in a field of ripening corn to either side of a small henge monument – perhaps similar to the Dyffryn Lane henge.



*Plan of the henge and timber circles near Llanrhaeadr-ym-Mochnant.*

*The Maes Mochnant standing stone lies within sight of the henge and circles.*

By kind permission of the landowner we were able to undertake exploratory work on these cropmark sites with the help of a number of local volunteers, to test their state of preservation and to see what we could learn about their dating.

A trench across Timber Circle 1 revealed two of the post-holes in the surface of the natural gravel, just below the ploughsoil. This timber circle is just over 7 metres in diameter and composed of six posts. Excavation showed that the post-holes were about a metre in diameter and had originally held substantial upright timbers about half a metre across. A human cremation burial had been placed in one of the pits, perhaps as a foundation deposit. The posts themselves had long rotted away but the outer face of one had clearly been charred when it was set up. In due course charcoal from the charred post will provide us with a radiocarbon date, showing when the tree from which it was taken was cut down. Charcoal from a larger timber circle at Sarn-y-bryn-caled near Welshpool yielded a date of about 2000 BC.

A single post-hole of Timber Circle 2 was identified in a second trench. This was similar in size to those of the first circle but in this case there were no signs of



**Top:** trench across Timber Circle 1 – the darker areas marking the position of two of the post-holes each about a metre across. **Middle:** top of one of the post-holes – the darker area in the middle, encircled by charcoal, represents the original wooden post about half a metre across. **Bottom:** half-sectioning the post-hole, partly in order to get a charcoal sample for radiocarbon dating.



*Volunteers helping to clean the surface of the natural gravel in the trench across the henge, looking for traces of the outer ditch visible from cropmarks and geophysical survey.*

burning. Although we will not be able to obtain a radiocarbon date for this circle it seems likely that the two timber circles were broadly contemporary. This circle was composed of ten posts and was just over 10 metres in diameter.

A combination of aerial photography and geophysical survey has shown that the henge monument had a broad outer ditch just under 20 metres in diameter with a possible entrance gap on one side. Inside it is a thinner inner circle as well as a number of possible pits. Sample excavation showed that the outer ditch was about 3 metres across and a metre deep. There had formerly been a turf mound inside the ditch which either sealed or had spread across the thinner circle which seems likely to have held upright timbers.

At the centre of the site was a large pit filled with rounded cobbles which had been cut through the turf mound, possibly at a much later date. Towards the bottom of the pit were the shattered remains of a large Beaker vessel of a style dating to about 2000 BC.

CPAT is most grateful to the landowner for permission to carry out excavations at the site and to a number of volunteers who helped with geophysical survey and excavation. Funding was made available by Cadw as part of a nationwide survey of prehistoric funerary and ritual monuments in Wales.



## info

For further details of the Llanrhaeadr dig: <http://www.cpat.org.uk/projects/longer/meusydd/meusydd.htm>  
Prehistoric funerary and ritual monuments project: <http://www.cpat.org.uk/projects/longer/pfr/pfr.htm>  
Tanat Valley Historic Landscape: <http://www.cpat.org.uk/projects/longer/histland/tanat/tanat.htm>  
For henge monuments, timber circles and Beaker pottery see: *Prehistoric Wales* (2000), by Frances Lynch, Stephen Alhouse-Green and Jeffrey Davies

*Top: trench across the henge showing the central stone-filled pit in the foreground and the inner and outer ditches in the background. Bottom: fragments of decorated Beaker pottery dating to about 2000 BC found in the central pit.*

# Roman buildings near Bwlch

Some of the Roman forts in Wales are well known – such as the legionary fortress at Caerleon and the forts at Y Gaer near Brecon and Segontium near Caernarfon. Many other forts are privately owned and consequently much less well known. The Roman fort at Pen-y-gaer near Bwlch, to the west of Crickhowell, is one of these less well-known sites. It formed part of a chain of forts along the Usk valley, a day's march from Abergavenny to the east and Brecon Gaer to the west. It played a role in policing the Iron Age tribe of the *Silures* following the Roman conquest of Wales.

As long ago as 1803 the remains of a possible Roman bathhouse were found to the north-west of the Pen-y-gaer fort, suggested by the presence of large stones 'having the appearance of Hearth Stones and Chimney Pieces'. The restorative power of bathing was an important aspect of Roman military life. Bathhouses are known outside many of the larger and more permanent forts – such as those at Caersws and Castell Collen.

Since no record had been kept of the precise whereabouts of the building remains found in 1803 it seemed worthwhile carrying out geophysical survey on a number of likely areas to see whether we could find it again. So far, nothing has been found in the area to the north-west of the fort suggested by the earlier accounts, but hints of building remains have come to light in an area about 100 metres to the south of the fort.



*Visitors being shown traces of Roman building remains found just below the turf.*



*Lower stone from a Roman hand-mill, found amongst the building rubble.*

With the kind permission of the owner a small area was opened up in September 2007 to see whether this might be the missing bathhouse, even though it was in quite a different location to that suggested by the earlier accounts. It soon became clear from the discovery of stone wall footings, found in association with an abundance of Roman pottery, roofing tile and a coin of the Emperor Hadrian (AD 119–138), that we had indeed found the remains of previously unknown Roman buildings close to the Roman fort. However, a number of aspects about the site – notably a spread of iron smithy waste – suggest that rather than the bathhouse we have probably found workshops that supplied the army with weapons and armour. It seems likely that the bathhouse, if it exists, still awaits discovery somewhere else near the fort. It is hoped that there might be the opportunity to return to the site some time in the future to see whether we can find out more about the Roman way of life in Breckonshire.

CPAT is most grateful to the landowner for permission to carry out excavations at the site, to Cadw for funding, and to the children of Cwmdu Primary School, the local community, members of the Brecknockshire Society and members of the Llangynidr Local History Society for their interest, enthusiasm and encouragement.



*Children from Cwmdu Primary School looking at some of the finds from the dig.*

**info**

CPAT website: <http://www.cpat.org.uk>

# Events in 2008

Below are some of the activities we are arranging for 2008. See our website for further details. Get in touch if you would like us to give a talk to your group on our work or if you would like to help in any way.

## National Archaeology Week

A number of activities are being planned for National Archaeology Week 2008, between Saturday 12th – Sunday 20th July. Contact us or look at our website for further details.

## Fieldwork projects

We are planning a number of fieldwork projects this year including further work on the Bronze Age axe factory site near Hyssington in Montgomeryshire, work on prehistoric sites in the Walton Basin in Radnorshire, survey work on defended enclosure sites in the Severn Valley, surveys of sites in the Vale of Clwyd, the Tanat Valley and in the Brecon Beacons. See the CPAT website for further details.

## Historic landscape walks

As in previous years we will be leading a number of walks to visit sites of historical interest in the countryside. Two of the walks are in conjunction with the Elan Valley Trust and the Cambrian Mountain Society. The first, on 14 June, will look at evidence for medieval farms and farming in the Claerwen valley. The second, on 16 August, will visit the Roman marching camp at Esgair Perfedd built during the Roman invasion of Wales. See the Elan Valley website for further details.

## info

Elan Valley Trust: <http://www.elanvalley.org.uk/events/>  
CPAT website: <http://www.cpat.org.uk>  
email enquiries: [chrismartin@cpat.org.uk](mailto:chrismartin@cpat.org.uk)  
phone enquiries: 01938 553670  
further details of this year's projects: <http://www.cpat.org.uk/projects/thisyear/thisyear.htm>



Visit to prehistoric and later sites on Llangynidr Mountain in 2007, organised on behalf of the Brecon Beacons Park Society

# Llanelwedd – a tomb with a view

Bronze Age burial monuments were often sited in prominent positions in the landscape – in places where they could either be seen from afar or in places with a good view of the surrounding countryside. Nowhere is this more so than in the case of the cairn excavated last autumn at Llanelwedd, on the hills north of Builth Wells, with glorious views over a 25-mile stretch of the Wye valley, stretching from the Cambrian Mountains west of Rhayader in the north to the Black Mountains near Talgarth in the south.

The cairn, together with a number of other sites, lies within the area of a planned extension to the roadstone quarry on Llanelwedd Rocks, overlooking the Royal Welsh Showground. Full excavation was therefore necessary before the start of clearance works. It was almost certainly one of the sites investigated with the help of workmen by the Reverend Owen of Llanelwedd in 1906. Only a short note was kept of what was found on that occasion, though evidently a large central capstone was dragged to one side and the burial cist (a stone ‘box’ of upright slabs) which lay beneath it was emptied, fortunately leaving most of the site unexplored.

Fuller excavation brought to light some interesting architectural details about the cairn as well as some dating evidence. The original cairn built around the central cist had been fairly flat-topped and encircled by a kerb of about 25 upright stone slabs, some of which had tumbled over.



The original burial would have been placed inside the central cist, and although no trace of this had survived Reverend Owen's excavations a fragment of decorated Beaker pottery and a barbed-and-tanged flint arrowhead found nearby on the surface of the cairn may have been inadvertently discarded when the cist was dug out. The finds suggest that the monument dates to about 2000 BC.

The central cist was just large enough to have held a crouched burial, typical of this period. The soils on Llanelwedd Rocks are very acidic and it is unlikely that any trace of a human burial would have survived to modern times.



*Left: the Beaker burial cairn during the course of excavation. Note the cairn of stones surrounded by a kerb of upright slabs with a central burial cist and displaced capstone just to the left of the figure. Top: flint barbed-and-tanged arrowhead (with tip missing) found on the surface of the cairn. Right: one of the excavation team – admittedly the smallest! – demonstrating that the central cist could have held a crouched burial.*



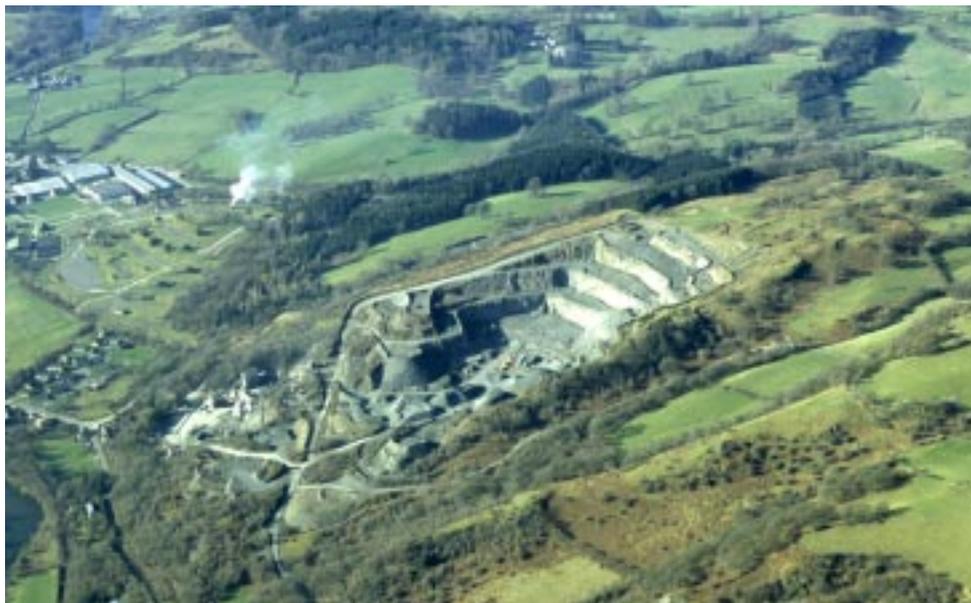
Evidence came to light during the course of the dig that the hill had first been quarried during the Bronze Age. Slabs of rock had been prized out along the line of fissures in the natural rock outcrops near the cairn – probably in order to obtain the slabs from which the cist and kerb were built (see photo opposite).

Some time in the recent past the original cairn had been more than doubled in size, when a large quantity of smaller stones were piled on top, obscuring the original form of the monument, probably during the course of land improvement in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries. A number of other large ‘clearance cairns’ can be seen in the neighbouring fields, some of which have perhaps similarly ‘buried’ much earlier sites.

A second larger Bronze Age burial cairn lies within the area of the quarry concession. Hopefully there will also be the opportunity to excavate this site before it disappears, so that we can learn more about life and death in the Bronze Age in the Builth Wells area.

CPAT is very grateful to the landowner and tenant of the site for permission to excavate the site, to the Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund and Cadw for funding, and to the staff of Hanson’s Llanelwedd Quarry for their kind help and assistance.





*Above: Llanelwedd Quarry seen from the east, with the Royal Welsh Showground at the top left. The excavated cairn lay just above the top of the quarry in an area where the topsoil was about to be stripped for an extension to the quarry. The outcrops of volcanic rock here have been quarried for many years. Left: the site nearing the end of the dig with the central burial cist, displaced capstone and the remaining kerb stones still in place. Right: fissures in the natural rock outcrops near the burial cairn. Slabs of stone had clearly been levered out – probably for building the Bronze Age cist and kerb.*



#### info

'Dig Diary' see: <http://www.cpat.org.uk/projects/longer/llanelwe/diary/diary.htm>

# Wrexham's Maelor Saesneg

Wrexham's Maelor Saesneg or 'English Maelor' is listed as one of the important Welsh historic landscapes. This bit of Wales – sandwiched between Cheshire and Shropshire east of the river Dee – it is aptly named. In terms of its landscape it has much in common with its English neighbours, yet within the context of Wales is quite unusual.

There is much of interest in both its earlier and later history, but it is perhaps the story of medieval settlement and agriculture deeply inscribed in the landscape that is seen at its most significant historical asset.

The two most distinctive elements of the medieval landscape are its extensive tracts of ridge and furrow cultivation interspersed with moated sites. Much of the area today is down to grass, but the surviving ridge and furrow shows that during the medieval period a large proportion of the area was ploughed, the ridges representing individually cultivated strips or furlongs within large open fields. In places all trace of the ridges has been levelled by later ploughing, though their former existence can be traced by characteristic patterns of long strip fields created when a cluster of furlongs were amalgamated to form larger fields when the open fields were enclosed at a later date.

The moated sites originally surrounded timber halls each of which formed the centre of one of the numerous small manors and estates to which the surrounding open fields belonged. Some of the original moats, such as Halghton Lodge, have now largely sited up but others, such as that at Peartree Farm, still hold standing water.



Both ridge and furrow and moated sites are ‘very un-Welsh’ (to paraphrase Robert Graves), which begs the question of what they are doing here in Maelor Saesneg.

The area has been intensively farmed from at least early medieval times by both native Welsh and incoming Anglo-Saxon landowners – the presence of the latter betrayed by the frequent occurrence of ‘English’ place-names with Anglo-Saxon endings, such as *tun* denoting a settlement or homestead (as in Halghton and Overton) and *leah* denoting woodland (as in Penley).

However, the aftermath of the conquest of Wales by Edward I in the late thirteenth century is a likely historical context for widespread landscape change in Maelor Saesneg. Lands confiscated from supporters of the deposed Welsh princes were granted to incoming English landowners and settlers – including Queen Eleanor – responsible for clearing large tracts of land and turning it into arable. Agricultural produce was traded at the newly-created medieval market at Overton with its grid-like pattern of streets.



*Left: medieval moated site and ridge-and-furrow cultivation at Halghton Lodge, east of Overton. Top: a water-filled moated site at Peartree Farm near Horseman’s Green. The moats were crossed by a bridge and enclosed timber-built manor houses. Middle: complex pattern of ridge-and-furrow near Worthenbury. Bottom: part of the centre of Overton.*

### info

Maelor Saesneg landscape: <http://www.cpat.org.uk/projects/longer/histland/maelor/maelor.htm>

# Bomb scare in Welshpool . . .



CPAT's offices in Welshpool (pictured above) is one of the official reporting centres for the Portable Antiquities Scheme in Wales – a voluntary scheme for recording archaeological objects found by members of the public. Every year thousands of finds are discovered in Britain, many by people using metal detectors but also by people out walking or digging their garden. Quite a range of interesting objects are brought in for identification, ranging from prehistoric bronze axes to Victorian brass buttons – though luckily few high explosives!

The bomb squad was called to CPAT's Welshpool offices in October 2007 to deal with what looked like a hand grenade brought in for identification.

The object, found in a garden in New Radnor, looked suspiciously like a second world war German egg-shaped hand grenade or *eierhand-granate*. It was only after the police had cordoned off the area that it was found to be a harmless iron knob – possibly from a gatepost!



## info

Portable Antiquities Scheme in Wales: <http://www.cpat.org.uk/services/portable/portable.htm>

*CPAT is grateful to the following organisations for their help in funding the various projects described in this newsletter.*



**Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund for Wales**

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*Front cover: excavations at Llanelwedd Rocks – see inside.*