

CLWYD-POWYS ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST



Llanelwedd
Bronze Age burial cairn

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 recently excavated last 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.



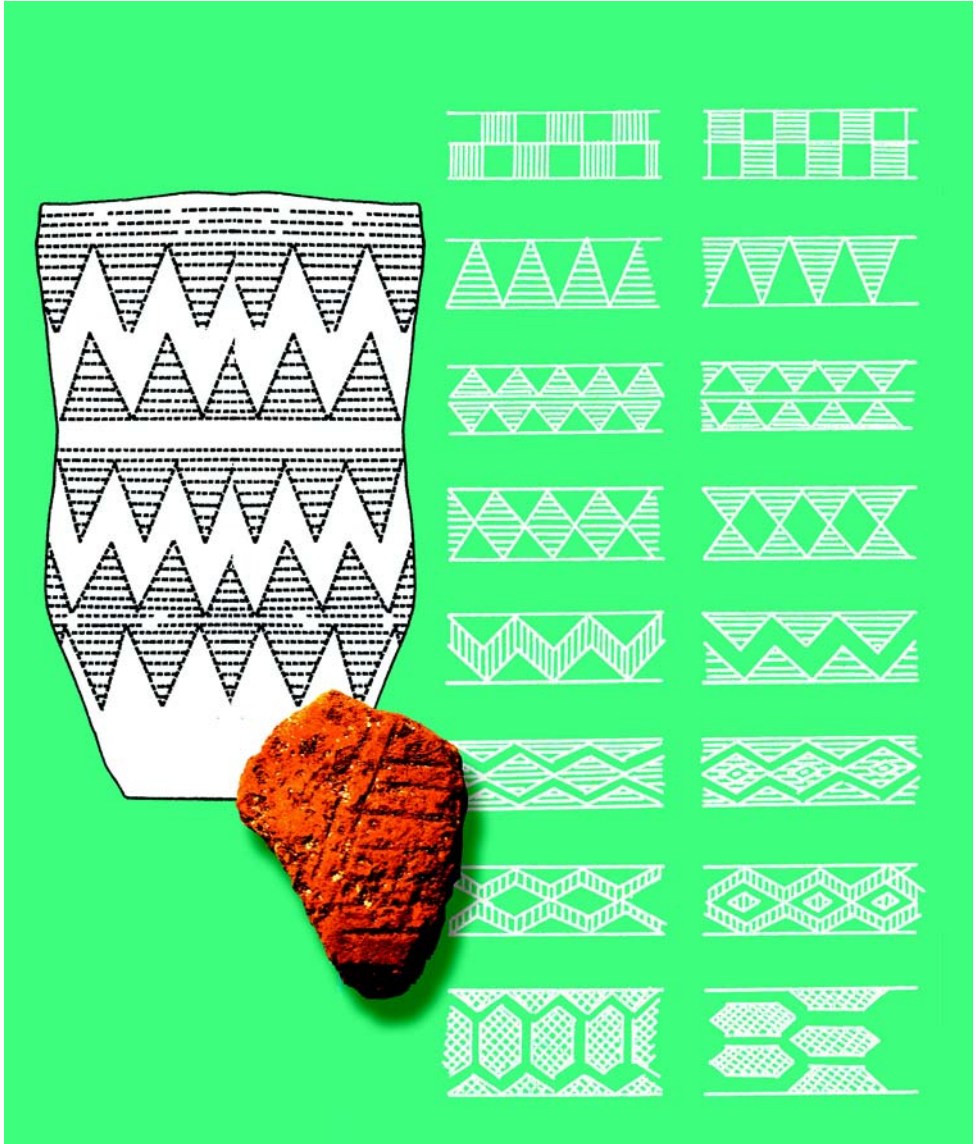
The original burial would have been placed inside the central cist, and although no trace of this had survived Reverend Owen's excavations a fragment of decorated Beaker pottery and a barbed-and-tanged flint arrowhead found nearby on the surface of the cairn may have been inadvertently discarded when 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. Above: 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.





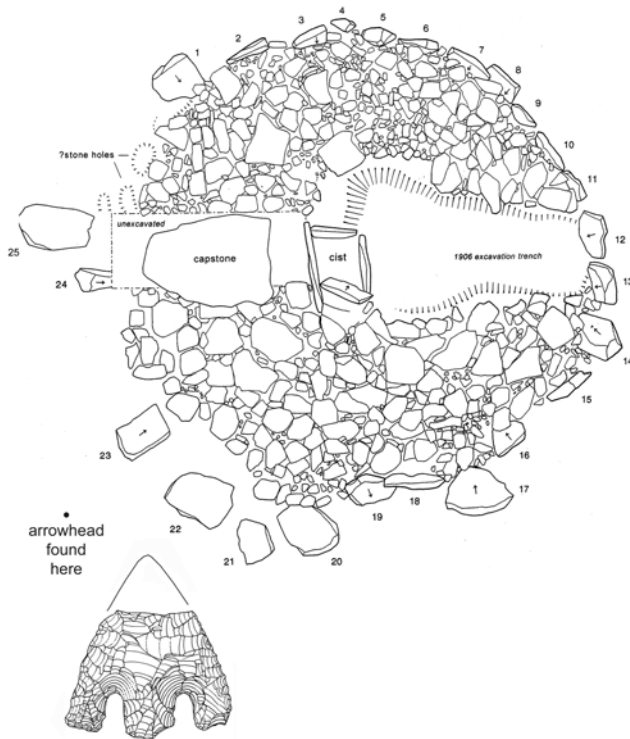
Sherd of pottery found at Llanelwedd decorated with a triangular pattern. The sherd comes from a drinking vessel known as a 'Beaker' like the one shown in the drawing which is from Merthyr Mawr near Bridgend in south Wales. Beakers were in use over a long period of time – between about 2600 and 1600 BC – and were often decorated with with geometric patterns like this.



Above: view of the site towards 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.



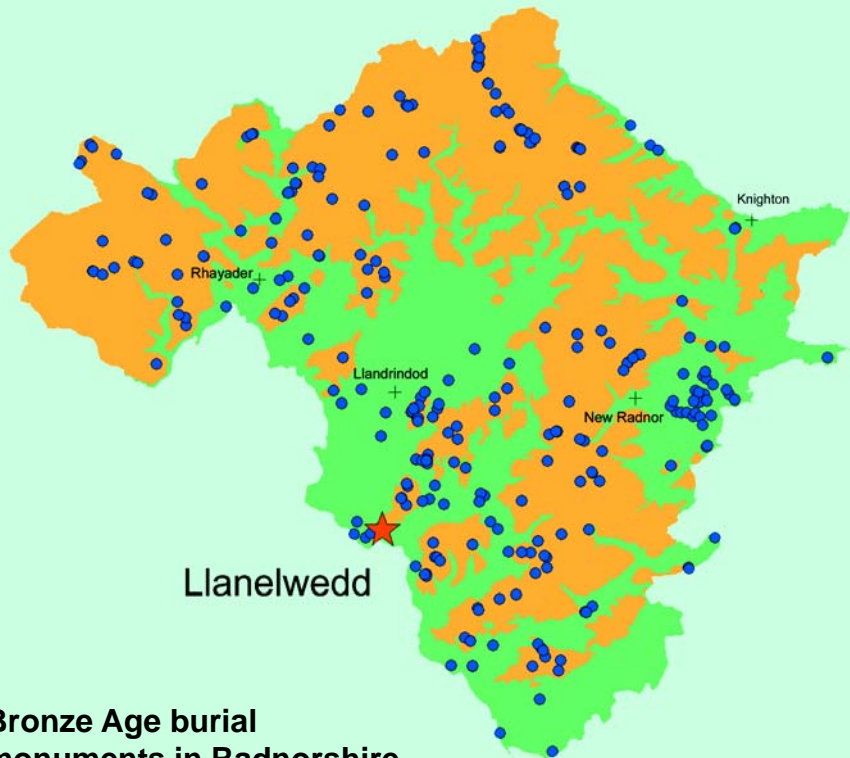


Plan of the Llanelwedd burial monument, showing the central cist, displaced capstone, kerb stones (numbered) and the trench excavated by the Reverend Owen of Llanelwedd in 1906.

Drawing of the Llanelwedd arrowhead at full size. They were used for either hunting or in warfare.



Unexcavated cairn at Pont Marteg near Rhayader with kerb stones around the outside, just like the Llanelwedd monument. Better-preserved sites like this are protected as Scheduled Ancient Monuments. Nowadays ancient monuments are generally only excavated where they are going to be destroyed by development – as at Llanelwedd



Bronze Age burial monuments in Radnorshire

Recent survey work has shown that more than 250 certain or possible Bronze Age burial monuments in Radnorshire. They were all circular in shape and were generally built out of materials that were readily to hand – such as soil and turf or stone.

Most of the sites probably belong to the earlier part of the Bronze Age, between about 2300–1500 BC. They give a clear picture of where people were living at this time and show that the earlier Bronze Age was a period of rapid growth and expansion in mid Wales.

Many of burial monuments have probably been lost or destroyed due to later activity, perhaps especially on the lower-lying ground shown in green on the map above.



Aerial view of the Llanelwedd quarry showing the site of the excavated burial mound. Hopefully there will be the opportunity to excavate the second larger mound before it too disappears.

CPAT is grateful to the landowner and tenant of the site for permission to excavate the site, to the ALSF and Cadw for funding, and to the staff of Hanson's Llanelwedd Quarry for their kind help and assistance.



Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund for Wales

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The Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust
7a Church Street
Welshpool, Powys, SY21 7DL

tel 01938 553670, fax 01938 552179
email trust@cpat.org.uk
website www.cpat.org.uk

Registered Charity 50830
Limited Company 1212455

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For more info about Llanelwedd see the 'Llanelwedd Dig Diary' see: <http://www.cpat.org.uk/projects/longer/llanelwe/diary/diary.htm>

For more info about prehistoric burial sites see <http://www.cpat.org.uk/projects/longer/pfr/pfr.htm>