

AUTUMN 2008



Llanelwedd Dig

CLWYD-POWYS ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

LLANELWEDD DIG 2008

The first Bronze Age burial cairn was dug at Llanelwedd in 2007. A second one was dug in the autumn of 2008, together with a number of much later sites, including a corn-drying kiln.

For a day-by-day account of the dig in 2008 visit www.cpat.org.uk/projects/longer/llanelwe/diary08/diary08.htm.

Below: Bronze Age burial cairn with stone cist excavated in 2007. Bottom: visit to the site in 2008 by pupils and staff of Llanelwedd Primary School.



Over the last two years archaeologists have been looking at a number of interesting sites on Llanelwedd Rocks overlooking Builth Wells on land earmarked for quarrying by Hanson's Quarry. The sites have a fascinating story to tell about the way of life of people living in the area in the distant and more recent past.

The Llanelwedd dig began in 2007 with the excavation of the first of two Bronze Age burial cairns or stone mounds. Like the first cairn, the second one excavated in 2008 was probably also built about 4000 years ago, by members of one of the earliest communities to live in this part of mid Wales.

In 2008 the opportunity was also taken to look at a number of other much later sites just next to the second cairn. These included a corn-drying kiln and bread oven which probably belonged to a derelict farmstead that lies close by. It is hoped that it will be possible to come back in a future year to find out more about the farmstead associated with the corn-drying kiln and people who lived there.





Top: The Bronze Age burial cairn during excavation in 2008. **Middle:** the grave pit at the centre of the stone kerb. **Below:** the large boulder possibly representing a symbolic door on one side of the kerb.

In some ways the second Bronze Age burial cairn at Llanelwedd was very similar to the first. Both were defined by an outer kerb of stones, had almost exactly the same diameter, and seem to have been flat-topped. In some respects they were quite different, however. Instead of having a stone burial cist, the second cairn covered a large grave pit. The outer kerb of the first cairn had been built of thin upright slabs of quarried stone whereas the second cairn had a kerb mostly made up of rounded boulders. One of these was unusually large and had the appearance of a symbolic door – perhaps to the afterlife.



The sites of both burial cairns seem to have been specially chosen. The second cairn lay on a slight crest of Llanelwedd Rocks, at the southern end of the Carneddau hills, with panoramic views of the Wye Valley.

The grave below the stone mound was very large and appears to have contained a wooden or coffin or chamber. No trace of the original burial had survived, most probably because of the acidity of the soil, though fragments of a bronze pin that may have been placed with a burial were found towards the base of the grave. Two barbed-and-tanged flint arrowheads were also found within the grave.

Much effort had gone into digging the grave pit. For most of its depth had to be cut through solid bedrock. Signs of burning around the edges of the pit show that it had been dug with the help of 'fire-setting' – a technique used in early copper mining – which involved the use of fires to fracture the rock, followed by pounding with stone mauls to break it up.



Top: the grave pit during excavation. **Middle:** the grave pit mostly cut through solid rock. **Below:** traces of burning around the edges of the grave pit, showing that it was quarried by 'fire-setting'. **Above left:** lumps of quarried volcanic rock from the fill of the grave pit.



The second Bronze Age burial cairn (marked by part of the stone kerb visible on the right-hand side in the photo) had been later buried beneath a larger heap of stones which had probably been gathered up during field clearance. A robbing pit had also been dug into the top of the burial cairn, marked by a slight hollow at the centre of the mound.



Just like the first Bronze Age burial cairn, the second one was overlain by a later stone heap which was almost certainly the result of later stone clearance, perhaps from medieval times onwards. Today, the Carneddau hills are largely devoted to animal grazing, but it is clear that in the past patches of more level ground between the rock outcrops were being ploughed to grow crops like oats and barley. Over the years the stones turned up by the plough were gathered up and added to the top of the earlier burial cairn. Later on, a robbing pit was dug into the top of the cairn. This may have been in about 1906 — at about the same time that the first cairn is known to have been excavated by the Reverend Edmond Owen of Llanellwedd.





The corn-drying kiln with the stokehole at the front. The opening leads to a stone-lined tunnel or flue which channelled hot air to a chamber at the back where the corn was dried.



By chance, the remains of a much later farm, dating to perhaps the fifteenth or sixteenth century, lay close to the Bronze Age burial cairn excavated in 2008.

The farm complex included a kiln for drying corn grown nearby. This was a fairly large stone-built structure, set into the slope of the hill,



Above: the remains of a circular bread oven set on top of the flue of the corn-drying kiln. Left: taking samples of the black, ashy soil in the stokehole.

the stokehole of the corn-drying kiln. At one time many remote farms probably had outdoor bread ovens. Straw and sticks were burnt inside the oven to heat it up. After the ashes were raked out the dough was placed inside for baking.

with a stokehole on the downhill side, a drying chamber on the uphill side, with a stone-lined flue linking the two. The drying chamber would have had a timber floor where the damp grain was dried before threshing. Analysis of the ashy soil from the stokehole will show what crops were being dried and what fuel was used.

The remains of a circular bread oven were found on top of the flue. This would originally have had a domed top and an oven door opening from





Copper and bronze were known by the Bronze Age peoples that built the two excavated burial cairns at Llanelwedd. Even so, good-quality flint, probably brought in from some distance away, was clearly considered the best raw material for the three barbed-and-tanged arrowheads that have been found during the excavations at Llanelwedd.

The prehistoric people living here about 4000 years ago were also well aware of the properties of different types of stone to be seen locally at Llanelwedd Rocks. The thin slabs used in the construction of the cist and kerb of the cairn excavated in 2007 had clearly been split from nearby outcrops by using wedges. The rock-cut grave pit below the cairn excavated in 2008 had been dug out with help of fire-setting – a quarrying technique also used in early metal mining.



Bronze Age barbed-and-tanged flint arrowheads found at Llanelwedd. The two on the left came from the grave pit of the burial mound excavated in 2008. The one on the right came from the burial mound excavated in 2007.

CPAT is grateful to the everyone who has helped in making a success of the Llanelwedd dig, including the landowner, the Howell Family, Mr and Mrs Hackley of Carneddau Farm, and the staff of Hanson's Quarry, in addition to the following organisations who have provided funding or help in kind:

Aggregates Levy
Sustainability Fund
for Wales



Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru
Welsh Assembly Government



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Front cover: kerb of the second Bronze Age burial cairn excavated at Llanelwedd, viewed from the north-west. The large boulder looks as though it was intended to symbolize a door.