

# newsletter

CLWYD-POWYS ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

Autumn 2010



# Circles and pits at Four Crosses



Above: work in progress on a 20-metre diameter Bronze Age ring-ditch with a central grave, on the route of the bypass, representing a ploughed-down round barrow.

Over the summer the Trust was involved in what turned out to be a kilometre-long excavation in advance of the construction of the Four Crosses bypass. The excavations were funded by Powys County Council on behalf the Welsh Assembly Government.

Four Crosses, lying at the gateway to the upper Severn valley, has a rich archaeological history, no doubt because of its siting near the confluence of the Severn and Vyrnwy and the rich agricultural land in the area. The soil conditions are also conducive to producing cropmarks here, showing up buried sites that would otherwise be invisible. As a result the sequence so far includes possible Mesolithic activity, Neolithic and Bronze Age burial monuments, Iron Age burials and metalworking, Roman metalworking and farming activity, early medieval burials as well as the better-known monuments such as Offa's Dyke, the medieval church and later transport features such as the former railway and canal.

The bypass cut through a wide variety of different sites, some of which were known before excavation and some of which came as a surprise. The full story will only become clear once post-excavation work has been completed but a number of different periods are clearly represented. Amongst the

earliest sites is a ring-ditch with a central grave pit (see photo on left) representing an early prehistoric burial mound. Up to a dozen or so similar Neolithic and Bronze Age burial mounds are now known in the immediate area of Four Crosses. Most of these have now been ploughed flat, but it is clear from the excavation of other sites in and around the village that these mounds continued to form prominent landmarks throughout the Roman and early medieval periods. Four Crosses was evidently an important prehistoric burial ground and there are hints that some of the mounds were arranged in lines 500 metres or more in length, and may even have influenced the siting of Offa's Dyke in the late eighth century AD.

Other sites included a stretch of pit alignments (see photos on right) which remain one of the enigmas of the archaeology of Four Crosses. Their dating remains uncertain but they appear to represent a field system, possibly of Bronze Age date, extending to well over 60 hectares in extent, and possibly therefore providing evidence of early land allotment in central Wales.

Among the later discoveries at Four Crosses were the remains of at least four clamp kilns dating to the late eighteenth or earlier nineteenth century, used for the manufacture of bricks from adjacent clay pits.



Top: cropmarks showing part of the complex of pit alignments and a Bronze Age ring-ditch at Four Crosses. Bottom: excavation of a stretch of pit alignments crossing the line of the bypass. Recent research by John Halsted of Birmingham Archaeology, on another line of pits to the east of Four Crosses, raises the possibility that they may date to the early Bronze Age. We wait to see whether this exciting possibility is confirmed by radiocarbon dates from this line of pits excavated in advance of the bypass.

# Even bigger prehistoric circles

Our Autumn 2009 *Newsletter* included an article showing how radiocarbon dating was helping to piece together the phasing of the remarkable complex of prehistoric and later sites in the Walton Basin in eastern Radnorshire. Small-scale excavations later that autumn allowed us to put in one more piece of this landscape-sized jig-saw puzzle.



Above: aerial photo of the large, 100-metre diameter Walton Court ring-ditch intersecting with two Roman marching camps (see sketch plan on opposite page). Ring-ditches are generally only between 10–20 metres in diameter, like the one visible in the field to the top left, and represent ploughed-out Bronze

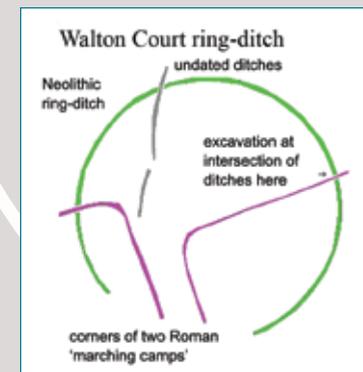
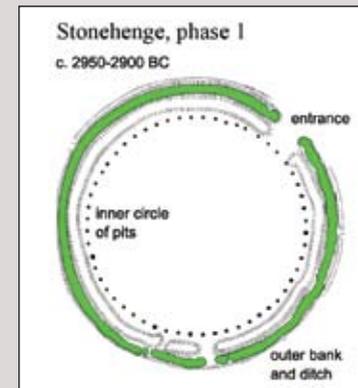
Age burial mounds but the Walton Court site is far too big for this. At one time it been thought to be a Roman gyrus — a fenced enclosure used in military training — but excavation (top right) has shown that it was Neolithic in date and much earlier than the ditches of one of the Roman marching camps.

A ring-ditch (left) near Walton Court Farm is one of a small group of large-diameter ring-ditches that are known in Wales, especially in the borderlands. These are considerably bigger than the much more common ring-ditches that represent ploughed-out Bronze Age burial mounds. There has been speculation that these larger ring-ditches might in fact represent the precursor of Neolithic henges, like the circular enclosure at Stonehenge — dated to between 2950–2900 BC — which pre-dates the earliest stone circle to be built there and, which like Walton Court, has a bank and ditch also about 100 metres in diameter.

With the kind permission of local landowners and as part of an ongoing assessment project funded by Cadw, sections were excavated across the Walton

Court ring-ditch which confirmed that it was much earlier than the Roman marching camps and showed that the original ditch was up to about 1.8 metres wide at the top and 1.3 metres deep. A burnt twig found on the bottom of the ditch has provided a radiocarbon date of about 2570–2300 BC, suggesting that the Walton Court ring-ditch though perhaps several hundred years later than the first phase of Stonehenge, nevertheless still belongs to the end of the Neolithic period.

In the current year sections have been excavated across large ring-ditches at Pentrehobin near Mold and at Carreghofa near Llanymynech. It is hoped that radiocarbon dating will show in due course whether these sites are also Neolithic in date.



Plans of of the Walton Court ring-ditch and Stonehenge phase I shown at the same scale.



Trial trenches dug in 2010 on the site of the 42-metre diameter ring-ditch at Pentrehobin (top) and across the 55-metre diameter at Carreghofa.

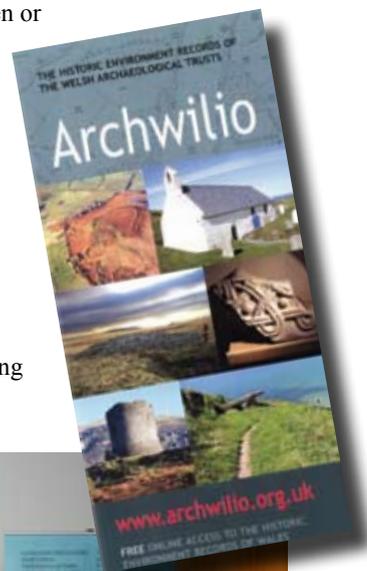
# Minister launches Archwilio

On 1 July 2010 the four Welsh Archaeological Trusts proudly launched Archwilio, their joint online access system to the Historic Environment Records (HERs) of Wales. The launch took place at Cadw's annual *Trefnadaeth Conference*, held this year at the Liberty Stadium, Swansea with Welsh Assembly Government Minister for Heritage, Alun Ffred Jones officiating.

Archwilio (from the Welsh for 'explore, examine, audit') has been developed by the Archaeological Trusts to provide wider public access to the vast range of information about archaeological sites and monuments and historic buildings across the country held in the HERs, currently numbering well over 150,000 records. Searching by using keywords or an interactive map will let you find everything from Palaeolithic cave sites to Cold War radar bunkers.

It's expected that Archwilio will become an valuable tool for education, discovery and research projects. Making information more widely accessible will lead to a wider understanding of our cultural heritage and help to preserve important historical and archaeological remains which often lie hidden or unrecognised in the landscape.

The page opposite has some tips on how to get the best out of using Archwilio.



Staff from the four Welsh Archaeological Trusts with Welsh Assembly Government Minister for Heritage, Alun Ffred Jones at the launch of Archwilio.

- The first window in Archwilio — accessible at [www.archwilio.org.uk](http://www.archwilio.org.uk) — gives a map showing the Welsh regional HERs (Historic Environment Records) managed by the four Welsh Archaeological Trusts. Buttons towards the top provide background information about Archwilio, conditions of use and links to other records. Click on the map to choose which of the HERs you want to look at — Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust for central and north-east Wales, Glamorgan-Gwent Archaeological Trust for the south-east, Dyfed Archaeological Trust for the south-west, and Gwynedd for the north-west.
- This takes you to whichever of the HERs you have chosen. Here, you will find a search box at the top left and a map window at the centre. There are a number of different ways of searching the record. For example, you can enter a place-name or the name of a site in the search box, to see what it comes up with. Otherwise you can enter a 'site type' such as 'castle' in this box (the **Themes** button on the right takes you to another window at the bottom of which is a link to a **Site Types** list which covers all the different types of sites in Wales). Alternatively you can search by how old things are in the **Period** search box (the 'Themes' window also has a list of the periods used by the record) or you can search for all the sites in a particular **Community** by selecting one of the names in the drop-down menu, which lists all the communities in the relevant HER. You can also toggle between an aerial view and a map in the map window, pan and zoom to a particular area and look for all the sites that are known in the area covered.
- To search for particular records you will need to read the **Conditions of Use**, tick the appropriate button, and then enter return which will give you a list of search results which will show up on the map and in the list towards the bottom of the page. Note that at the moment your enquiry will come up with a maximum of 100 records. Clicking on a particular item in the search list will take you to a further window which will have further information about this particular record. The online data is updated on a daily basis to ensure that you will always have the most up-to-date information in the HER.
- The information system is in continuing development and we hope to introduce further options in the future. Please let us know how you get on and if you have any problems finding the information you want. The **Enquiries** button on the right gives details of how to get in touch with us.



# Llanelwedd – a longhouse in the Radnorshire hills

Following the rescue excavation of two Bronze Age burial cairns on Llanelwedd Rocks overlooking the Royal Welsh Showground just to the north of Builth Wells described in the Spring 2009 *Newsletter*, the focus within the quarry concession shifted to an abandoned upland farm complex with the support of funding from Cadw. Work is still in progress on the finds, but it seems likely that the farm was established on formerly unenclosed common land on the southern end of the Carneddau hills in about the later seventeenth century. The farm had evidently been abandoned by the later eighteenth or early nineteenth century long before the Llanelwedd tithe map of 1845 was drawn up and consequently no record of the



name of the farm or its occupants have yet been traced. The principal building is a longhouse about 25 metres long and 5 metres wide with accommodation for the farmer and his

*The Llanelwedd longhouse from the west in June 2010. At the far end of the house can be seen one of the two fireplaces and to the right the remains of the spiral stairs leading to an upper floor. In the foreground is a circular stone bread oven, later inserted into the cowhouse at the lower end of the building. The slab floor in the lower end of the farmhouse was also a later addition to the kitchen floor.*



family at the upper end and a cowhouse at the lower end. It can be paralleled by a number of surviving Radnorshire farmhouses described in Richard Suggett's authoritative *Houses & History in the March of Wales. Radnorshire 1400–1800*, but as one of the few excavated longhouses it is important in providing the opportunity of looking at a relatively short-lived complex, undisturbed by later alterations.

The longhouse was essentially timber-framed but with stone chimneys at either end of the farmhouse. Spiral stairs in the thickness of the gable wall at the uphill end led from the parlour to first floor accommodation in the roof space. A passageway next to the chimney at the lower end led from the kitchen into the cowhouse. The earliest floors in both the farmhouse and the cowhouse were of beaten earth. All the surviving walls were bonded with clay and the lack of both roofing tiles and fragments of window glass indicates that the roofs were thatched and the windows shuttered rather than glazed.

*Fireplace in the kitchen at the lower end of the farmhouse, where all the cooking took place. A bread oven was later built onto the back of the chimney.*



*Fragments of a slipware cup or bowl, probably made in Staffordshire in the late 17th or early eighteenth century.*

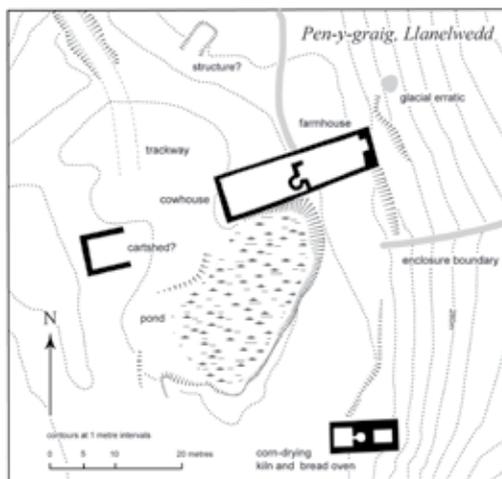
Despite the spartan nature of the house, its nameless occupants evidently maintained some social pretensions: a bronze spur on the floor of the parlour shows that they kept a riding horse and associated pottery sherds show a preponderance of fine wares, including early tea wares.

The longhouse was clearly integral to the banked enclosure which butted up against it and which took in an area of over 5 hectares of mountain land next to the farm. The farm is clearly to be seen in the context of the rapid colonization of Radnorshire's extensive upland commons in the post-medieval period.

Interestingly, the cowhouse and a number of other building structures extended onto the common next to the farmhouse. These include a possible cartshed and the corn-drying kiln that also featured in the Spring 2009 *Newsletter*. This large structure had stokehole at the lower, windward end and a rectangular stone-lined drying chamber at the uphill end, linked by a stone-lined flue. In addition to cattle rearing the farm's economy evidently depended upon cereal production on the small patches of cultivatable land between the rock outcrops on Llanelwedd Rocks. Like the longhouse the kiln probably had a timber-framed superstructure and thatched roof which also gave protection to a circular stone-built bread oven sited in an unusual position on top of the flue.

The kitchen fireplace in the farmhouse also curiously had a bread oven which had been inserted at a later date into the upper end of the cowhouse, possibly in replacement for the oven attached to the corn-drying kiln.

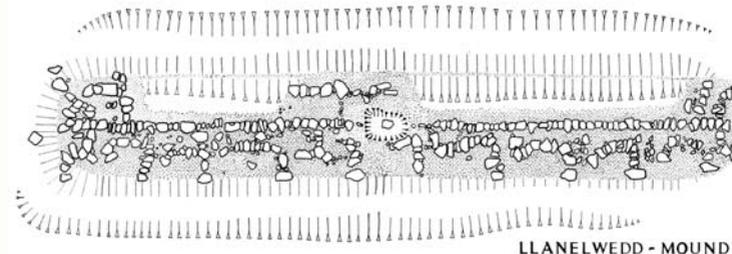
*Top right: plan of farm complex.  
Centre right: corn-drying kiln with stokehole in foreground. Bottom right: circular bread oven on top of the flue.*



## Pillow mounds and rabbit farming

The excavation of the Llanelwedd longhouse may help to solve one of the further archaeological puzzles of Llanelwedd Rocks — the group of long, low mounds, now quarried away, which used to lie on the former common land a few hundred metres to the south of the longhouse. Several of the mounds, with ditches to either side, were excavated in advance of quarrying in the 1960s, and were found to contain curious lines of stones, as in the plan below,

and the discovery of Neolithic pottery suggested that they might conceivably be prehistoric burial mounds. Following more recent excavations on similar mounds elsewhere in Wales it is now clear that the mounds are artificial rabbit warrens — known as 'pillow mounds' — with stone-lined nesting boxes. Such warrens enabled upland farms like that at Llanelwedd to enhance their income by diversifying into the lucrative trade in rabbit meat and pelts.



*Aerial photograph of a group of well-preserved pillow mounds in the Radnorshire hills near Aberglanhirin Farm, close to the mountain road between Rhayader and Aberystwyth.*

# Druid graves and Roman road

Recent geophysical survey by the Trust has revealed a small cemetery of at least six square-ditched barrows and possibly other graves at Druid in Denbighshire, just west of Corwen, as part of a project funded by Cadw assessing early medieval burial sites in the Clwyd-Powys area. Several of the barrows were first spotted by Toby Driver of the Royal Commission in 2006 and photographed from the air as parch-marks in grassland. They are invisible at ground level, but several more have now been added by the recent geophysical survey.

The orientation of the barrows varies slightly, but interestingly although they are all aligned roughly east–west they are also set out in next to a Roman road whose side ditches

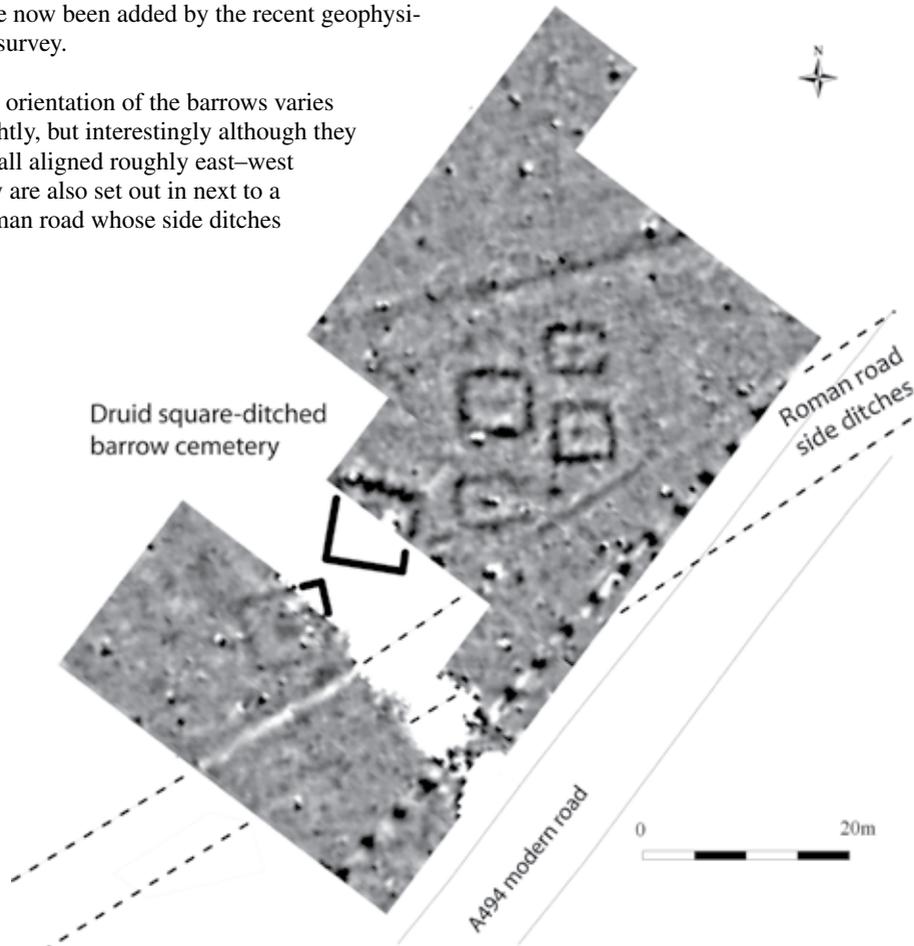
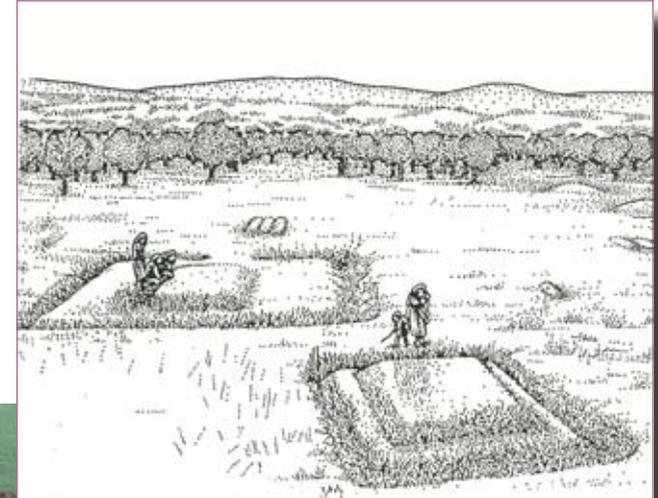
also show up on aerial photographs and in the geophysical survey. The Roman road, which partly lies partly below the modern A5 and partly below the A494 at this point, links the legionary fortress and Roman town of *Deva* at Chester, and the Roman fort at Bala in the Dee valley.

The Druid monuments are similar to those at a number of early medieval cemeteries in

Wales such as Tandderwen in Denbighshire, Capel Eithin and Trefollwyn on Anglesey, Llandygai in Gwynedd, and Plas Gogerddan in Ceredigion. At Tandderwen, just to the east of Denbigh, the ditches were seen as quarries for low mounds over the graves. The siting of the graves at Druid adjacent to

the Roman road is significant since it implies that the road was either still in use or was at least visible in the landscape in the early medieval period and recalls the occurrence of a number of early medieval inscribed memorials sited alongside some of the Roman roads in Wales.

*Part of the early medieval cemetery at Tandderwen, excavated by the Trust in the 1980s, with a reconstruction drawing of how the graves may originally have appeared. The graves were found to date to the period between the 5th and 12th centuries AD.*





## Golden Jubilees and tree-felling at Beacon Ring

In our Autumn 2008 *Newsletter* we announced that the Trust's ownership of Beacon Ring, the fine Iron Age hillfort on the summit of Long Mountain, east of Welshpool, which we will be managing in a way which ensures its preservation and makes it accessible to everyone. As previously mentioned, we are planning to return it to the condition it was in nearly half a century ago before the trees were planted in the interior to celebrate the Queen's coronation.

Earlier Royal celebrations almost certainly explain the change of the hillfort's name. In earlier accounts, dating back to the 9th or 10th century, it is referred to either as the camp on *Cefn Digoll* (the Welsh name for Long Mountain) or as *Caer Digoll* ('Digoll camp'). The earliest use of the name 'Beacon Ring' we have so far been able to find dates to 1827. It therefore seems likely that Beacon Ring was the site of one of the numerous beacons that were lit across the country in 1809 to celebrate the Golden Jubilee of King George III. The earliest recorded beacon at the Beacon Ring hillfort appears to date to 1887,

however, lit to celebrate the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria (see overleaf). The site of the beacon may be the a low mound on the summit of the hill, though this has previously been thought to be a Bronze Age barrow.

Clearly both the name of the hillfort and the vegetation cover have both seen marked changes over the years. In our endeavour to make the site more accessible to the general public and a better haven for wildlife we have been seeking advice from a number of bodies, such as the Forestry Commission, the Montgomeryshire Wildlife Trust and Cadw, about the best way of going about this. We are now planning that the trees will be felled sometime within the coming twelve months, in a way that will cause as little lasting damage to the monument as possible.

Like all recently-felled woodland the hillfort will no doubt take on a somewhat devastated appearance until the upland meadow that once flourished on the site can be restored — but this will inevitably take some time and patience to achieve.



The photographs opposite show the hillfort as it is now, with the trees planted inside the hillfort in the 1950s to celebrate the Queen's coronation. The sketch above, by the Trust's former chairman, the late Noel Jerman, shows what it was like in the 1930s, before the trees were planted.

# 'And fire the beacons up and down'

Beacon Ring hillfort, was the site of one of the chain of beacons spreading out from Great Malvern that were lit in sequence across the country on the night of 21 June 1887 to celebrate the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria. The



event is commemorated in the first poem in A. E. Houseman's *A Shropshire Lad*, simply entitled '1887', from which the above line is taken. Over sixty Welsh beacons were listed by name in *The Times* but the actual number was no doubt much higher: over 80 were said to have been visible from the summit of Snowdon. Preparations for the bonfire on Beacon Ring appeared in the *North Wales Chronicle* just a few days before it was lit.

"On the Beacon Ring, near Leighton Hall, a high point of the Long Mountain, Mr Naylor, of Leighton Hall, is erecting a huge bonfire. The work is being carried out under the superintendence of Mr Edwards, the engineer of the estate; and the structure, when completed, will be about twenty-five feet square, and sixteen or eighteen feet in height. For the purpose of the fire about sixty old tar barrels are being broken up, and they will materially assist the combustibility of the brushwood and other timber which is to be used as fuel!"

*The Trust is grateful to various landowners for permission to carry out the projects described in this Newsletter. Funding or help has been provided by these bodies:*



Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru  
Welsh Assembly Government



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**Front cover:** Four Crosses bypass under construction in 2010 (*photo Nigel Jones, CPAT*)

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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](mailto:trust@cpat.org.uk)  
website [www.cpat.org.uk](http://www.cpat.org.uk)

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