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Caergwanaf 2002 Interim report

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Interim report on excavations at Caergwanaf uchaf (Rhondda Cynon Taff), summer 2002 (ST 044806)

Dr T.P. Young

Abstract

The iron-working site at Caergwanaf was recognised in 1999 and was the subject of geophysical survey in 2000. This survey had revealed a large slag of bloomery iron-smelting slags on the floodplain of the Ely. Lesser quantities of slags were associated with a series of rectilinear features on the adjacent low hill, in the area of which a small quantity of Roman pottery was found on the surface. The lower site was interpreted as probably being early post-medieval in age. These excavations were designed to test the interpretation of the geophysical results and to determine the state of preservation of surviving features.

Two of the four planned trenches were actually executed. Trench 2 was located just above the edge of the flood plain, over an intense magnetic anomaly interpreted in 2000 as a bloomery furnace. Trench 4 was positioned to provide a section across a strong linear magnetic anomaly interpreted as a Roman ditch in the upper part of the site.

Trench 4 revealed the expected ditch, which had a broad "U"-shaped profile, approximately 1.5m deep and 2m wide. The upper sag fills of the ditch were stoney and did not continue across the entire trench width, but appeared to be interrupted to the south of an oval stone-filled feature. These upper levels yielded a 2nd- to 3rd-century pottery assemblage. The lower part of the ditch profile yielded a few sherds of late 1st to early 2nd century date.

Trench 2 showed a ploughsoil/hillwash profile thinning rapidly downslope from 0.55m at the west to 0.18m at the east. At the eastern end the underlying deposits showed evidence for some stirring and gouging, presumably during levelling and hedge removal in the 1950s. The deep hillwash at the western end of the trench overlay a mottled deposit of charcoal-rich dark soil. This was removed from the northern side of the trench to reveal a firm surface rich in hammerstone, probably a floor, abutting a ridge of pale silt with large pebbles near the northern edge of the trench. The base of the hillwash cut obliquely downslope through the deposits underlying the floor, which were seen to comprise a layered build-up of iron ore, charcoal, slag and clay; apparently all waste from the iron smelting process. Towards the east end of the trench a deposit of (?)roasted iron ore, with a very high magnetic susceptibility, was found to correspond to the position of the intense magnetic anomaly. This deposit rested on a layer of charcoal, itself resting on an irregular surface of in-situ burnt clay. The stratified deposits in trench 2 yielded only a small ceramic assemblage, but it was entirely Roman. Most contexts yielded pottery dated to the 2nd to 3rd century, but the lower part of the stratified waste yielded some possible 1st century material.

The new evidence allows the reinterpretation of the site as probably being entirely Roman, rather than having a Tudor component. The major slag dump on the flood plain has an area of approximately 100m x 80m. The dump can be interpreted to be up to approximately 2m thick (on the basis of the section in the banks of the Ely and on the difference in elevation of the dump surface with the natural floodplain in adjacent areas), giving a volume of at least 10,000 cubic metres. Estimates of slag weights in such dumps are notoriously difficult to estimate, but a concentration of 1 tonne/m³ has been used in other areas, and a 10,000 tonne slag dump places Caergwanaf alongside the scale of some of the larger Roman sites in the Weald, such as Bardown.

The identification of a major Roman iron smelting site at Caergwanaf increases the likelihood that this is the site mentioned in the oft-quoted reference to a find of Roman pottery and coins near Miskin in 1762.

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Background

Background to the project

The investigation of the site forms a component of a long-term project into the history of iron-making around the outcrop of the iron oxide ores of Glamorgan border vale, which has included excavation of slag dumps associated with a Romano-British smelting site at School Lane, Miskin (Young & Macdonald 1998), together with a number of geophysical surveys, largely undertaken by TY with other staff funded by Cardiff Archaeology Section, as teaching exercises and undergraduate projects for both the Department of Earth Sciences and the Archaeology Section of Cardiff University. These include geophysical survey of the

School Lane area (1997), geophysical survey of Mwyndy ironworks site (C16?) (1997), field survey of probable C16 iron-making site at Rhiwsaeson (1998), geophysical and geochemical study of a bloomery site in Cwmnofydd (1999) and geophysical survey of the Pont-y-parc mines (2001 and 2002).

The Caergwanaf uchaf site was selected for geophysical survey, and this was undertaken, under the supervision of TY, as a teaching exercise (Module HS23124, Prospecting and Surveying) for the Archaeology Section, Cardiff University, between April 8th and 15th 2000 (Young 2000).

The site in the historical landscape

The site is located on the west side of the Elai (River Ely), on the low hill east of Caergwanaf uchaf and the river floodplain below. To the east side of the Elai at this point was part of Clun Park, demesnes land of the Lordship of Miskin and a medieval deer park. The Caergwanaf ridge forms the route of the old coach road from Llantrisant to Pendoylan, which is met at Caergwanaf uchaf by a minor road from the east, skirting the south-eastern margin of Clun Park and crossing the Elai by a small bridge near New Mill (usually now referred to as Miskin Bridge, but formerly known, from at least the late 17th century, as Pont Felin Newydd). An earlier crossing on this site is indicated by references in 1536/9 to *Pont Risclidog of wood* (Leland, Itinerary), in 1578 to the *bridge of Ridisklidoge*, decayed or of *Rhyd Sglydog* (Rice Merrick, *Morganiae Archaioграфия*) and in 1588 to *Pont Rydsklidog* (Pembroke Survey of Miskin; NLW Bute MS 2361) as the southern corner of Clun Park. The ford in existence in the middle of the nineteenth century lay to the north of the bridge at New Mill, but its western approach was used as dump for construction waste which now forms a conical "tump" to the northwest of the bridge.

In the 17th century the boundary of the park was described (demesnes survey of 1666; NLW Bute Box 104/4) as being along "the highway leading from Cornel y Park toward Cowbridge unto a gate near the house of James ap John, smith and from thence to the river of Ely". This line is probably that extant on the park map of 1824 (GRO D/DD BE1/2), on which the boundary passes by the site of the smithy recorded on the 19th century Ordnance Survey maps, running along the northern margin of the property now the Miskin Arms Public House, reaching the Elai about 25m above the railway bridge (220m above the road bridge). The "gate" might have been on the line of the present Miskin - Pontyclun road. It seems unlikely that these two descriptions refer to the same position of the SW corner of the park, but rather that the Cowbridge road crossed the Elai close to the position of the present road bridge, and that the corner of the park was detached to make provision for the mill race for the New Mill (Felin newydd) in the early 17th century, and which appears to have originated just above the railway bridge.

Caergwanaf uchaf is situated on the east side of a small valley running northward to the Elai. To the west of the small valley the ground is higher, before rapidly falling to west into the valley of Nant Dyfrgi, which separates the area of Caergwanaf from Talygarn to the west. The geology of the site is quite complex. The old N-S road past Caergwanaf uchaf Farm is running approximately along the line of geological fault. To the west of the fault, the fields west of the farm lie on the middle part of the Carboniferous Limestone, but

our site lies on the lower part of the Carboniferous Limestone, with the underlying Devonian rocks occurring towards the M4. The Carboniferous Limestone is overlain by boulder clay on the hilltop, and by alluvium in the valley.

Surface finds of slag, together with old accounts of a large slag dump previously visible near the river "100 yds upstream of Miskin Bridge" (Strahan & Cantrill, 1904), indicated that the site was a bloomery iron smelting site of considerable significance. The field on the floodplain to the north contains traces of what appears to be a pond, probably fed by springs in the valley side above. The site was undated, but the volume and type of slag, together with the apparent use of water power, suggested a late Medieval to early post-Medieval age (15th-16th centuries). There are two other suspected 16th century bloomeries (a major bloomery at Mwyndy [ST 057815] and a smaller site at Rhiwsaeson [ST 071827], 1.5 and 3km northeast of this site respectively) in the area surrounding the iron ore outcrops in the area between Cefnryhendy and Llwyn-saer (subsequently referred to more simply as the Miskin iron ore bodies, to differentiate them from the Llanharri bodies to the west and the Lesser Garth bodies to the east). A substantial body of documentary evidence exists concerning iron making in the area in the 1530s and 1540s. Just across the Ely 400m to the north of the site is another early industrial complex at Hendy Isaf [ST 044812], but this may be younger and be a finery forge associated with a short-lived blast furnace built in the area to north, now called Talbot Green, in the 1590s.

Excavation

Project Design

The evaluation in summer 2002 was designed to test the preservation of the remains, test the tentative dating, and test the interpretation of the geophysical survey, through a series of four small trenches ranged across the site: Trench 1 to be placed in an area in the upper part of the site over an anomaly interpreted as a furnace, with Trench 2 across an adjacent enclosure ditch, Trench 3 was to be on the terrace edge adjacent to one of the late bloomery furnaces, extending up slope to cover part of one of the geophysical anomalies which may be a building and Trench 4 to examine the furnace on the slope below Trench 3. The results of these trial investigations would enable appropriate decisions concerning site preservation and future research excavation.

In the event, the availability of time and labour meant that only two of the four planned trenches were dug.

Trench 2

Trench 2 was positioned to examine an extremely strong magnetic anomaly, which had been identified as a probable smelting furnace. The magnetic anomaly proved to coincide with the extremely magnetically susceptible context [205], which may be the result of ore roasting, but which is a very unusual deposit. The trench was extended to allow better coverage of the supposed furnace position. [205] lies on a clay deposit ([203] and [209]) which may be an earlier hearth or furnace. Upslope of this material [203] is overlain (e.g. in Figure 3 below) by a horizontally-bedded succession of deposits, including slag, charcoal and clay. In the northern and western parts of the trench a pale stoney silt [211] may be structural. It is overlain (?) and

abutted by a surface [210] rich in small iron particles and hammer scale, and which is associated with a large slab of hearth lining (with adhering slag) close to the western edge of the trench. This surface is suggestive of either an in-situ smithy floor, or a deposit derived from a smithy. The floor was overlain by a deposit of charcoal which graded up into the variegated charcoal and brown clay of [202].

Contexts

Number	Description
201	top soil
202	charcoal and clay layer, very patchy, most charcoal rich in NW
203	brown clay, locally with fired clay inclusions, and more generally fired towards some margins
204	dark charcoal and slag deposit
205	red rubble gravel of slag and ore with burnt stone
206	unroasted ore
207	lower part of hillwash, locally with concentrations of artefacts near base
208	charcoal and slag rich layer in E of trench below 205
209	fired clay below 208
210	Fe-rich surface below 202 in NW (=221)
211	pale stoney silt in NW (wall/floor??)
212	brown clay over 214 in extension
213	brown silty sand over 214 in extension
214	black charcoal and slag-rich deposit over 203 (= 216+226?) in extension
215	heavy slag deposit, apparently over 212, in extension
216	charcoal
217	thin slag layer below charcoal
218	coarse slags in centre of trench
219	unconsolidated charcoal and slag in cut 220
220	cut (?) in floor near ?hearth
221	repeat of 210
222	charcoal
223	brownish clay
224	charcoal
225	ore
226	brown clay with slag

Trench 4

Trench 4 was one of three trenches planned to evaluate the site on the hilltop. It was positioned to evaluate a linear magnetic anomaly interpreted as a ditch. The probable ditch formed part of an approximately rectilinear system and had therefore been linked in the interpretation of the geophysical survey with the occurrence of Roman pottery, to suggest a Roman age for this part of the site.

The ditch proved to be rather more complicated than anticipated, although it could not be completely excavated in the time available. The upper layers of the ditch proved to be a stoney dark silt ([407] and [409]), bearing iron slag and Roman pottery. There was a substantial oval feature, marked by a heavy stone fill [408], probably forming a southern termination for the stoney ditch deposit, but possibly dug through it. If the oval feature was part of the late ditch fill, then it may suggest that the ditch was partially redug, leaving a causeway in the area of the southern part of the trench. Lower deposits in the ditch contained less

pottery, but all was Roman. Iron slag occurred to the very base.

The area to the east of the ditch had a deeper dark soil profile than the area to the west, and this dark soil had a high magnetic susceptibility. Shortage of time meant this aspect of the trench was not fully investigated.

To the west of the ditch two features were identified. The first was a small posthole, revealed as a pair of dark silt areas below [401]. Successive stages in the removal of the fill and packing of this hole are shown in Figures 1-3 below. The second feature was a rather amorphous feature with a dark (organic?) fill and large stones revealed cutting the upper deposits of the ditch. Although initially thought to be a post hole, the dark deposit had various tubular extensions, suggesting that the whole feature may have either been from a root mass, or from an animal hole.

Contexts

Number	Description
401	topsoil/ploughsoil
402	brown silty soil over E part of trench, in part base of 401
403	brown soil in p/h
404	p/h cut
405	small hole fill
406	disturbed natural in p/h
407	dark stoney silts in ditch sag
408	upper stone fill of pit feature
409	stoney fill in top of ditch
410	more yellow silts below 409, down to 70cm
411	stoney yellow silts 70-120 cm, gravel-rich at base
412	grey silts with charcoal lying on gravelly/sandy primary silt
413	ditch cut
414	organic material in possible p/h
415	brown silty clay in possible p/h

Interpretation

Trench 2

Only a very limited amount was excavated in the first season in Trench 2. The earliest deposits seen include a brown clay, locally with a fired surface, which is currently not thought to be natural. At the east end of this trench the surface of the clay [209] is dipping westwards into the hill. To the west a steeply dipping fired clay surface reappears [203]. This becomes less fired to the west and again dips into the slope. The clay surface is covered with charcoal in both these areas. The negative feature between the two areas of observed clay is filled with a deposit of reddened ore with some slag [205]. This feature corresponds to the extremely high magnetic anomaly. It is possible the feature represents an ore roaster, both on the basis of the material now filling it, and on its elongate nature in plan.

The western area of the clay surface is overlain by a sub-horizontal series of deposits comprising layers of slag, charcoal, ore and clay. Rather similar deposits were observed beneath the superficial layers in the central southern parts of the trench, where they appear to be associated with, or to underlie, the hammer scale-rich surface seen in the western end of the trench. These layers are therefore interpreted as being associated with successive working floors.

The floor in the northwest of the trench is bounded by raised deposits of very pale clay with stones. This material is not observed in the south side of the trench at the current depth of excavation. It remains unclear whether this pale material represents a deposit, perhaps natural, into which the floor was hollowed, or whether it represents a footing for a timber superstructure.

The presence of a complex involving working floor(s) terraced into the steep bank with downslope slag dumps is rather similar to the working floors, of similar age, identified at Sherracombe Ford, west of Exmoor, by Dr Gill Juleff (pers. Comm. 2003). Speculation has grown that the Sherracombe Ford site may be part of large scale Imperial exploitation of Exmoor's iron resources.

Trench 4

Trench four confirmed the Roman age of the ditch identified on the geophysical survey. The upper sag fills and the oval stone feature appear to be of mid 2nd to mid 3rd century in age. The ditch itself yielded only a small assemblage and given the potential for residuality on the site, the age of latest 1st to early 2nd century must remain tentative.

On the evidence of this trench it appears likely that only cut features are preserved on this part of the hilltop.

Interim Summary

The stated aims of the 2002 excavations were threefold:

- to confirm the interpretation of the geophysical anomalies,
- to ascertain the state of preservation of the features,
- to obtain dating evidence.

The results of the excavations have addressed these items successfully:

The interpretation of the linear magnetic anomalies in the upper part of the site was addressed by Trench 4, which proved a substantial (2m wide by 1.5m deep) ditch at the location of the anomaly. Magnetic susceptibility measurements confirmed that the ditch silts (particularly the upper silts at about 240 SI units) had a substantially elevated magnetic susceptibility compared with background (up to 120 SI units). In addition the upper stoney fills of the ditch contained substantial quantities of iron slag, which may also have had a significant contribution to the observed anomaly.

The interpretation of the major magnetic anomalies on the lower hillsides as furnaces has not been borne out by the results of Trench 2. The intense magnetic anomaly (with a peak close to 2000nT!) observed in the area of the lower part of Trench 2 appears to be associated with a dump of gravelly oxidised ore and slag, with a measured magnetic susceptibility locally of over 3000 SI units. The origin of this curious material is currently unknown, but it may be debris from ore roasting. The gravelly deposit appears to rest, at least in part, in a negative feature of burnt clay, but whether this is an ore roaster, or an earlier furnace, remains unclear at the present level of investigation.

The state of preservation of the features appears variable. On the top of the hill the ploughsoil (around 23cm) appears to have slightly truncated the archaeology, but the siting of this trench deliberately avoided areas where structures are believed to be present. In Trench 2 on the slopes, a similar depth of ploughsoil only truncated the ancient archaeological deposits at the base of the slope, where over-compaction and linear clay-filled gouges appeared to mark the flattening of the 1950s. On the higher slopes the modern ploughsoil overlay a considerable thickness of probable slope-wash deposits. These were marked by very mottled textures, particularly towards their base and this is interpreted as representing the effects of tree roots. The archaeological deposits below the slope-wash may be slightly truncated by the slope, but suggest accumulation on a much flatter buried terrace than had been expected. The deposits include large amounts of stratified debris from iron-making, but in several areas appear to rest on burnt clay surfaces, suggesting the possible preservation of earlier structures beneath.

The dating evidence obtained during the excavation largely comprised ceramics (both pottery and building materials) and appears on current evidence to be Roman. Pottery includes Samian ware and amphora sherds, indicating both an earlier date (1st – 3rd centuries) and a slightly higher status assemblage, than might have been expected. There was no ceramic evidence to support the expectation that the lower part of the site would be of Tudor age. Samples of stratified charcoal have been retained in order to pursue a radiocarbon date for the waste piles in Trench 2, but it seems unlikely that such a consistently Roman ceramic assemblage could be merely residual.

Discussion

The redating of the lower part of the site as Roman forces a drastic reconsideration of the site as a whole. Although the earlier interpretation of the lower part of the site as Tudor seemed the most likely interpretation, particularly in view of the large scale of the operation, that view cannot be sustained and the search for the 1540s iron mill must be pursued elsewhere.

The pottery assemblage is limited, but given the small area of excavation is surprisingly rich. Although questions of residuality cannot yet be addressed, the general evidence for age is for occupation in the 2nd to 3rd centuries, with limited evidence in both trenches for occupation as early as the late 1st century.

The scale of the smelting operation is certainly on a par with the major sites in the Weald. Cleere and Crossley (1995, p. 80) give slag volumes of 4500 m³ for Bardown, 10000 m³ for Chitcombe and Crowhurst, 15000 m³ for Footlands, 20000 m³ for Oaklands and 30000 m³ for Beauport. The main slag dump at Caergwanaf measures some 100 x 80m and is at least 2m thick over much of the area. An estimate of an average thickness of 1m gives 8000m³, but this estimate is likely to be very conservative for the site as a whole. There are no other sites of this type in Wales, but there are major smelting complexes just across the border in the Forest of Dean. Here the evidence is patchy, but it would appear that early Roman (up to about AD200) iron-making may have been focused on moderately large settlements (Newent, Dymock, Ariconium, Monmouth...), but much of the ore was transported for smelting up to 50km from Dean, and iron-making may have been an integral, if small scale, part of rural activities for farms and villa estates over a

very wide area. Later Roman iron-making in the area seems to have been mainly dispersed. However, the evidence for this interpretation is not particularly good. In the third great Roman iron-making area of the East Midlands there are again sites with a similar size, and with valley floor slag dumps (e.g. Crew 1998).

An area which shows some sites with similarity to Caergwanaf is Exmoor. Here sites such as Sherracombe Ford, Clatworthy Reservoir and Brayford are being shown to have slag quantities on a par with that seen at Caergwanaf. Sherracombe Ford also shows working floors terraced into the steep hillsides.

The unexpected richness of the pottery assemblage, with significant proportions of samian ware and amphora, together with the large volume of slag gives a strong suggestion that the site might have been something other than a simple rural smelting settlement, but rather a settlement with official control. The positioning of the site on the west bank of the Ely, the line of approach from the settlement (and possible fort) at Cowbridge some 7km to the SW, but on the opposite side of the river to the iron mines (near Mwyndy Cross) suggests a choice of location determined possibly by defensive considerations. The possibility of military control on the settlement must therefore be considered a possibility. Recent excavations in Cowbridge (Parkhouse & Evans 1996) have revealed substantial evidence for 2nd-4th century iron-working (800kg of smithing slag from the Bear Field site). A connection between the large amount of urban (or semi-urban) iron-working and the large iron-producing site at Caergwanaf uchaf is possible.

The identification of substantial Roman activity at Caergwanaf increases the likelihood that this is the site mentioned in the oft-quoted statement by Prebendary William Harris to the Society of Antiquaries in 1763 (and subsequently published in *Archaeologia*) "*Four miles north-west of Bolston Gaer, which lies near Miskin, the seat of William Bassett Esq., under a large bed of cinders, a coin of Antoninus Pius was found in 1762, together with a fine piece of earthenware, charged with greyhounds, hares, etc., which the workmen broke to pieces*". Caergwanaf lies 4 miles north-northwest of the Gaer, Bonvilston. A point 4 miles north-west of the Gaer would lie between Ystradowen and Llanharry, not at all close to Miskin Manor; the other site often linked to this reference is Mwyndy, which lies just over 4 miles North of the Gaer.

Acknowledgements

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Figure Captions

Figure 1. Plan of site, showing magnetic gradiometer results from 2000 survey and location of 2002 trenches. Grey scale for magnetic survey from -12nT black to + 12nT white.

Figure 2. Section on south side of Trench 2, showing working floor to West overlying slag dumped into the underlying structures (furnaces?).

Figure 3. Section on North side of Trench 4, showing section of ditch.

Evaluation Report: Pottery. Evan Chapman (NMGW)

The pottery is almost entirely Roman in character with no indication of any significant later activity on the site. Beyond this, caution is required as the sample is relatively small, but the pottery appears to suggest second to third century activity. A few sherds could be of later first century date but do not really provide convincing evidence for occupation at that time. There is nothing to indicate activity beyond the third century.

Trench 2

(201) *west of trench, ploughsoil and hillwash*
Post-Medieval jar
2 greyware jars
greyware dish/bowl
BB flanged and beaded bowl
oxidized jar
greyware handle
4 oxidized sherds
16 greyware sherds
5 amphora sherds

(201) *central part of trench*
greyware tankard, 20 probably related
sherds, 2nd – 3rd century

(202) samian bowl, Dr38, Central Gaul. The type emerged in the late Hadrianic period but is typical of the second half of the 2nd century (Webster 1996, 51)
greyware jar
BB flanged and beaded bowl/dish,
BB sherd
6 greyware sherds
3 oxidized sherds

(202B) 3 greyware sherds

(203) *brown clay*
greyware rim, possibly a tankard
2 oxidized sherds
2 buff sherds

(214) greyware bowl/dish

(218) oxidized flanged and beaded bowl with
probably related base, ?late 1st century
10 oxidized sherds
2 greyware sherd

Trench 4

(401) *Ploughsoil*
4 oxidized sherds
1 greyware sherd

(402) BB plain rim dish with traces of lattice
decoration, 2nd century
2 BB jars, probably 2nd century
3 greyware jars, probably 2nd century
44 greyware sherds
8 BB sherds – some burnt

2 oxidized sherds
1 oxidized shed with white outer surface
1 micaceous buff shed
3 fawn/buff sherds, probably amphora

(407) BB flanged and beaded bowl, 3rd century
greyware jar, 1st-2nd century
2 greyware sherds

(408) BB jar, probably 2nd – early 3rd century
BB sherd
10 greyware sherds

(409) 3 greyware jars, 2nd-3rd century
oxidized jar
9 BB sherds (3 joining)
32 greyware sherds
3 oxidized sherds
2 buff sherds
2 amphora sherds

(410) 2 samian sherds, joining, Central Gaul, 2nd
century
BB jar
3 greyware jars, probably 2nd- 3rd century
red dish or bowl
oxidized base with red colour coat
oxidized sherd
3 BB sherds
17 greyware sherds

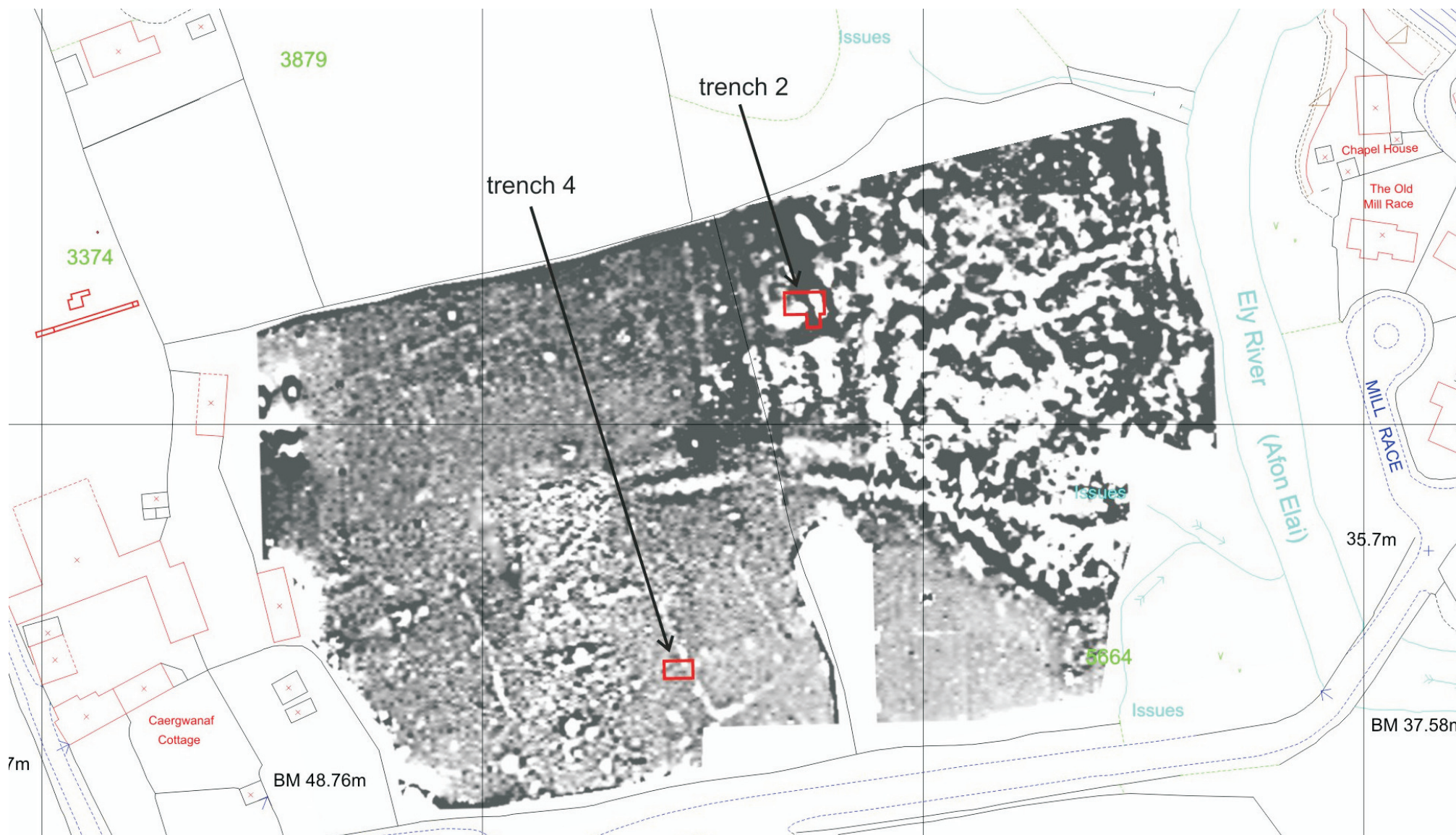
(411) jar, probably 2nd – 3rd century
8 greyware sherds

(412) samian, South Gaul, 1st – early 2nd century
jar, brown fabric with black burnished
surface, probably 1st – 2nd century

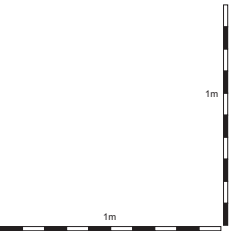
oxidized rim, small flask or similar, 4 joining
sherds, probably early

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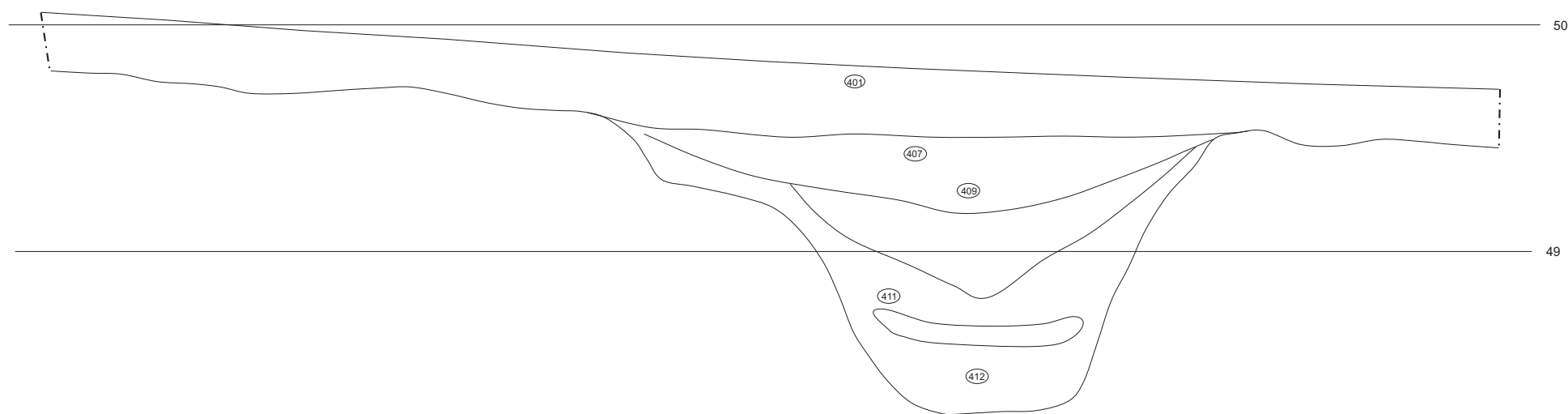


West



West

East



GeoArch	Caergwanaf
Report 2003/04. Figure 3	
Section on North side of Trench 4	
Original section drawn 4/7/02 by Emma Canham & Liz Moore at 1:20 Heights in m OD.	
Produced: 25/1/04 T. Young	Scale: 1:20

