Excavations at Moel y Gaer, Bodfari:
2017 Phase 2 excavations interim report

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Moel y Gaer Bodfari from the North

Excavations 2017
The work took place for two weeks, July 15th to the 29th. Two trenches were opened, 5 and 6 in Figure 1. Trench 5 had been started in 2016.

Figure 1: The location of Phase 1 trenches 1 to 4 and Phase 2 trenches 5 and 6. Hachure plan overlain on LiDAR and contours.
Trench 5

Trench 5 is located at a break through the western ramparts where in 1908 Stapleton opened a trench and claimed to have found an entrance (Stapleton 1909). Our interest in this area is related to the possibility of an entrance but also to the possibility of Moel y Gaer being a two phase enclosure. It is generally accepted that many hillforts started as univallate enclosures with later multivallate enhancements either replacing or adding to the original single circuit and that the early rampart was of ‘box’ type whether entirely stone built or timber framed (Davies and Lynch 2000, 155). This sequence is possible at Moel y Gaer Bodfari where the almost entirely robbed-out inner rampart, as exposed in trenches 3 and 4, forms the univallate enclosure in the south-western and south-eastern quadrants, Figure 2. In the north-western quadrant the first phase rampart could have been replaced by the second phase multivallation which was constructed over the top of it whereas to the south it takes a different line further downslope and becomes the middle rampart. The second phase involves the dismantling of the first phase rampart to the south-west and south and building the second rampart and ditch and the outer counterscarp bank with inner ditch around the northern and western sides including the northern intuined entrance. In the post-medieval period the rear face of the rampart in the south-western quadrant was steepened and modified banks added to the north and south to run downslope, as shown in Figure 2. This seems to be a landscaped enclosure indicated by the ‘exotic’ trees within such as Scots Pine.

The positioning of trench 5, Figures 3 and 4, was intended to explore the possible Phase 1 rampart and its intersection with the Phase 2 rampart which, according to our scheme, was built over the top of it in the north-west quadrant. Also at this point the topographic survey and geophysics suggested a slight inturn of the Phase 1 rampart which may indicate an early entrance. The initial trench measured 12m east-west and 20m north south but subsequent extensions were added covering approximately another 14m by 6m.

Figure 2: Earthwork plan showing the possible first phase univallate enclosure (red), and later multivallation (black). The boundary of the possible post-medieval landscaping is shown in green.
Excavation is at an early stage and will continue in 2018 although with the removal of surface layers interesting structure is beginning to emerge. Possible evidence for the Phase 1 rampart suggests that, as in trenches 3 and 4, it has been heavily robbed out although enough survives to establish some detail. The possible front face of the rampart consists of large blocks at the top of the break of slope, Figure 5. Approximately midway along the trench this outer face turns at right angles inwards to form what looks like one side of an inturned entrance, Figure 6. This is well preserved showing three courses of large laid blocks of local shale. To the south of this structure, the possible entrance passage, is a trampled surface and two possible postholes awaiting excavation which may be associated with the gate. Photogrammetry has been used extensively on site for recording and Figures 6 and 9 show parts of trench 5 using this technique. On the inside of the enclosure, to the east of the possible entrance, there is still much material to be removed but part of a circular structure constructed from dry-stone walling seems to be associated with the entrance. This could
be a guard chamber, Figure 7, the nearest excavated parallel being at Moel Hirradug (Brassil et. al. 1981-2), the next hillfort to the North.

*Figure 5: the front face of the Phase 1 rampart in trench 5*

*Figure 6: the Phase 1 inturned entrance, right – a photogrammetric model showing the entrance passage*

*Figure 7: part of the possible guard chamber associated with the inturned Phase 1 entrance*
Extensions of the trench to the North and West are aimed at exploring the relationship between this first phase rampart and the later rampart which forms a part of the multivallation of the western side, Figure 8. There is a lot of material to remove here and excavation will continue in 2018 although structure at the top of the Phase 2 rampart is already showing. It is important that material suitable for radiocarbon dating is found associated with the Phase 1 rampart to enable verification of the two phase enclosure scheme as outlined.

Figure 8: trench 5 showing the point where the robbed out Phase 1 rampart (in the foreground) disappears beneath the extant Phase 2 rampart

Figure 9: partial photogrammetric model of trench 5
**Trench 6**

This trench is located to determine the character of the Northern inturned entrance, Figures 10 and 11.

![Figure 10: the Northern inturned entrance. Trench 6 covers the eastern inturn (the horizontal ranging rod on the right hand side) and approximately half of the entrance passage.](image1)

As with trench 5, there is more excavation to do in trench 6 to establish the detail of the entrance although, again, structure is beginning to show. Figure 12 shows the terminal end of the eastern inturn which is revetted by a curved dry-stone wall of local shale with shale rubble filling the interior. The inturn is positioned at the break of slope and takes advantage of the natural topography (to the right of the horizontal ranging rod in Figure 10). It is not clear yet what happens to the revetting wall of the inturn on the downward slope. Within the passage, to the North of the terminal end, there is the hint of curved walling, a possible guard chamber. Within the structure of the inturn itself there appears to be an earlier outline which suggests phasing yet to be explored. Figure 13 is the photogrammetrical model of the whole trench.

![Figure 11: Trench 6 topography showing the steep slope to the east](image2)
Volunteers and community involvement

All community activities are organised in conjunction with Fiona Gale, County Archaeologist, Denbighshire County Council, and are focused on providing information on the latest techniques used in archaeology as well as more traditional excavation methods and interpretations of the site. During 2014-2017 we have had two artists in residence on the excavation who have provided an extra focus of interest for volunteers and visitors, providing interesting new ways of thinking (Gant...
and Reilly 2017). In the summer of 2018 there will be an exhibition of their work, together with archaeological background information, at the Oriel Plas Glyn Y Weddw, a gallery in Llanbedrog, Llyn peninsular.

In 2017, as in previous years, we did thirteen days of excavation involving a core team of 15 people plus local volunteers. Community involvement included an Open Day (11.00am to 4.00pm, July 23rd) with around 50 visitors being shown around the site, Figure 14. These were mostly local people although some had travelled from further afield. Several archaeological groups also visited including Liverpool University and the Denbigh and District Civic Society. These activities were advertised as part of the CBA’s Festival of Archaeology.

For the fifth year we opened the excavation to volunteers and had a very good response. A total of 26 people signed up in advance and 24 attended, we averaged 12 to 15 people per day including local school students who are thinking of taking archaeology at university plus people from France, Germany, Holland and America who were visiting North Wales for the first time. Some volunteers were experienced excavators having worked with the St. Asaph Archaeological Society, the Clwydian Range Archaeological Group and the Chester Historical Society, for others training was given in excavation and recording techniques, Figure 15. Ten volunteers were returners from last year.

If we take an average of 13 volunteers per day working for eight hours for 13 days that totals 1,352 person hours worked.

![Figure 14: Open day visitors waiting for a guided tour](image-url)
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References

