

# Hen Gastell, Llanwnda

## Excavation and Survey by Gwynedd Archaeological Trust in 2013



Ymddiriedolaeth Archaeolegol Gwynedd  
Gwynedd Archaeological Trust

 **Cadw**

# HEN GASTELL, LLANWENDA

## EXCAVATION AND SURVEY BY GWYNEDD ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST IN 2013

### *Introduction*

Hen Gastell, Llanwnda, near Caernarfon, is a small, atypical defended enclosure. Cadw are considering scheduling the monument but as its date and nature are uncertain further assessment was required. Gwynedd Archaeological Trust with the aid of a small team of volunteers carried out evaluation work in 2013. This included a geophysical survey, followed by a trial excavation and a topographic survey.

Hen Gastell is located on the southern edge of Llanwnda, on the northern bank of the Afon Carrog. It is situated on the end of a low ridge and its southern side is defined by a steep bluff. On the northern side of the monument is a deep and wide ditch, which encloses a small sub-rectangular platform. Outside the ditch is a large bank. The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales (RCAHMW) in their inventory of Caernarvonshire considered the site to be a “small promontory fort” of probable Iron Age date, but the outer bank is much higher than the interior, making it a poor defensive design. If there had been a timber structure inside the design might be more appropriate but that would make the site possibly medieval in date. There has also been some speculation that the ditch was a natural feature, perhaps a relict river meander, and no deeper than visible on the surface.



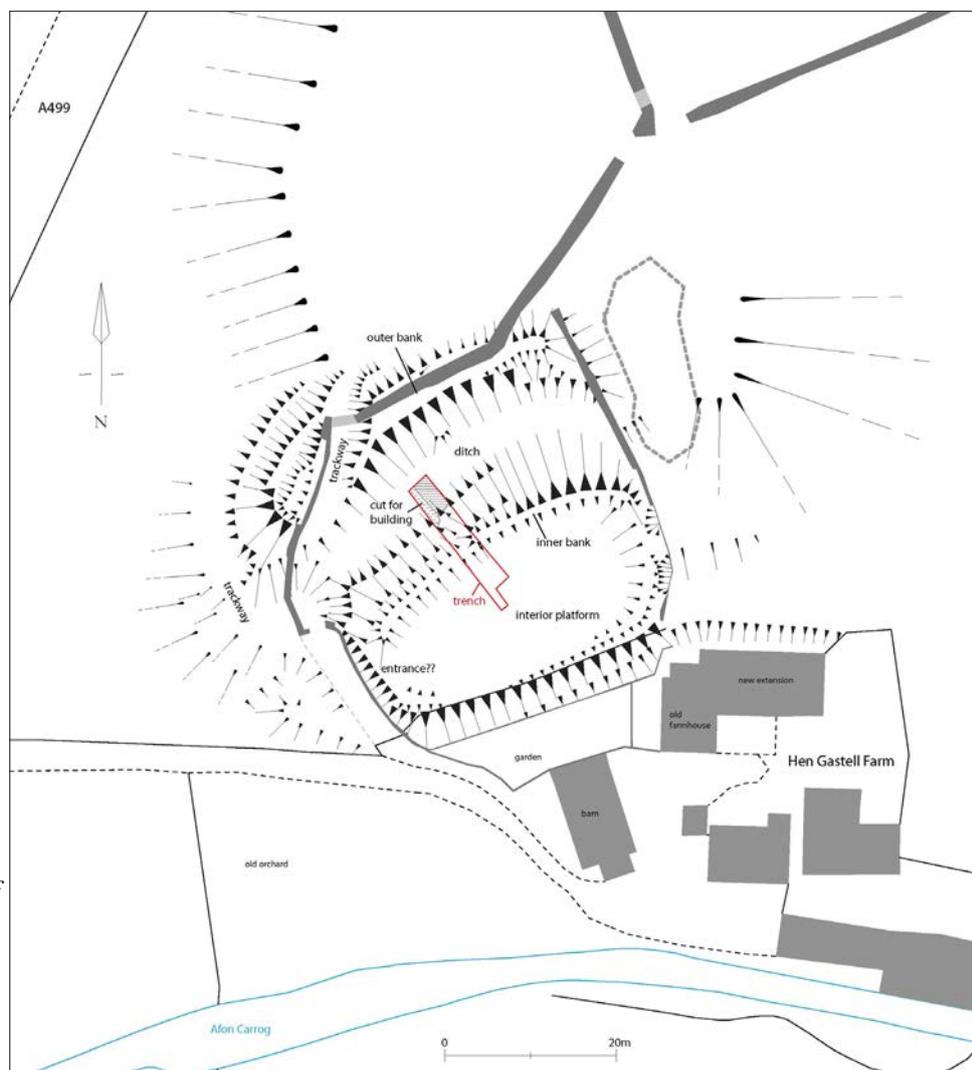
*View of Hen Gastell from the west*

### *Geophysical Survey*

As a first stage to try and clarify the site a geophysical survey was carried out using a magnetometer to detect subtle changes in the magnetic signal of the soils. The inner and outer banks, which anyway could be seen on the surface, were detected by the geophysical survey, but the ditch was not picked up. Subsequent work showed that this was because the upper part of the ditch was filled with iron-rich soil, giving a signal similar to the natural sub-soil.



*Dave Hopewell carrying out the geophysical survey*



*Topographic survey of Hen Gastell showing location of trial trench*

### **Topographic Survey**

A topographic survey was more productive. A survey quality Global Positioning System (GPS) was used to plot the earthworks and to record a profile across the whole monument. This picked up detail missed by earlier Ordnance Survey plans and gave a better ideal of the natural ground level than could be judged by eye from inside the site.

The survey shows the outer bank running in a short arc around only the northern part of the site with no trace elsewhere. Similarly the ditch could only be seen on this side. As the geophysical survey was unable to detect the ditch this could not show whether it once continued around the western and eastern sides of the monument, but there are no surface traces of either the bank or ditch visible. Perhaps the bank had been levelled into the ditch when the current field system was laid out.

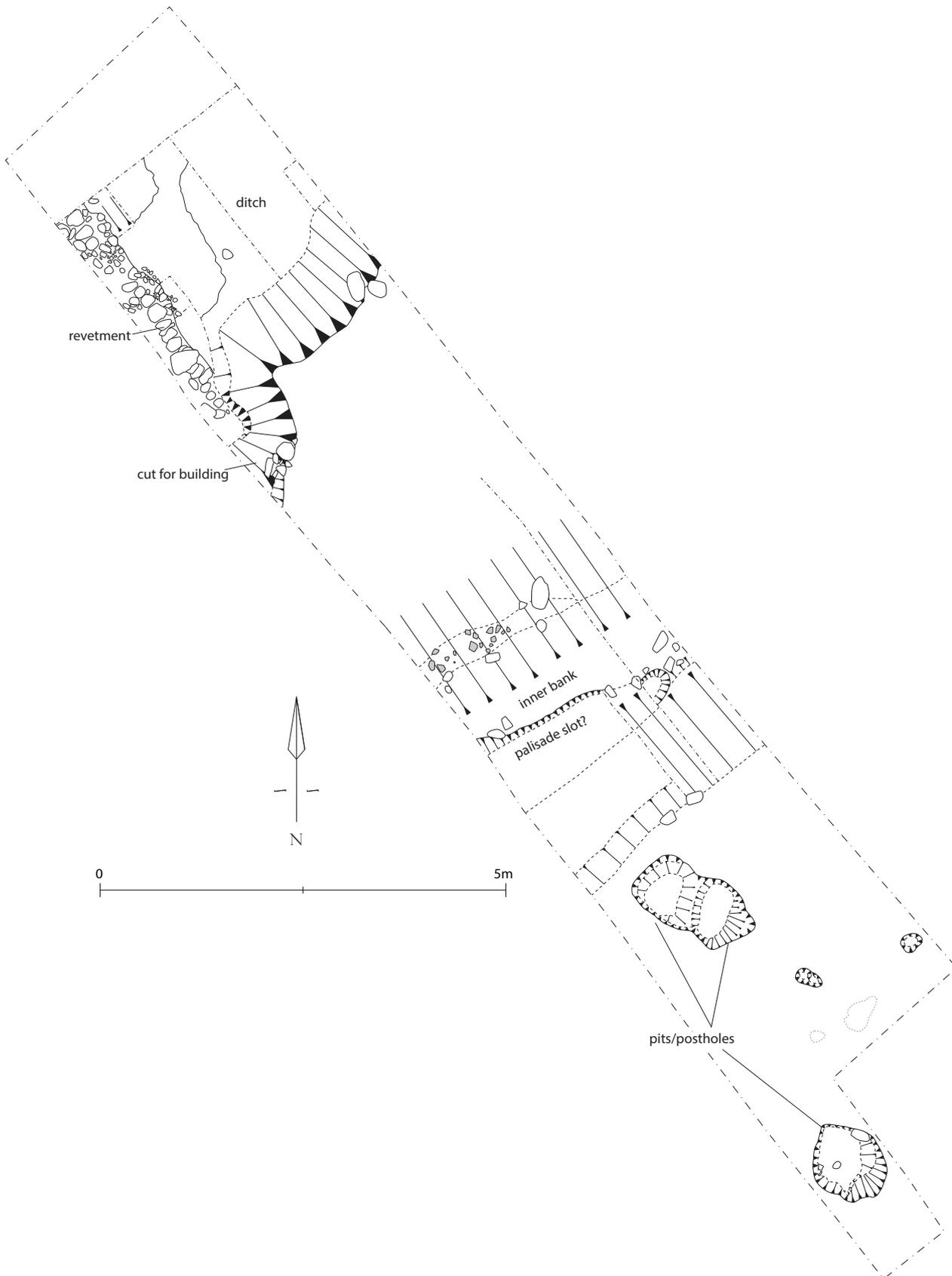
A low inner bank runs along the northern edge of the inner platform. This can be seen to continue certainly along the eastern side and probably along the western side of the platform with even a hint along the top of the southern side, making it very likely that the platform survives largely intact with no significant loss to erosion, deliberate levelling or cutting away of the site.

Curving around the south-western end of the outer bank is a slight terrace that appears to be a trackway. While this may just have been for field access it could be an original part of the monument, possibly leading to an entrance. There is a fairly clear end to the outer bank here and there could have been an original gap in the bank and ditch. There is also a possibly original gap in the inner bank on this western side. However if there was an entrance here a considerable ramp of soil has been removed for a later trackway running through the outer bank.

The south-east facing side of the monument is defined by a steep scarp nearly 3.5m high. This is currently very straight and revetted at its base by a low stone wall. The land at the base of the slope is flat and used as a garden. The scarp was planted with trees by the present owner, but prior to that had been covered in grass. In the 19th century there were some small buildings built into the base of the slope, but there is little evidence that the slope was dug away for the farmyard, and it is probably largely natural, the result perhaps of erosion by the river.

**Excavation**

To investigate the ditch, inner bank and interior platform a trial trench measuring 15m by 3m was dug. The topsoil and ploughsoil was stripped from the trench using a mini-digger. Further excavation was carried out by hand between 21st and 25th October with a small team of volunteers. While the excavation was going on a metal-detector survey was also carried out to recover items discarded over the monument and to ensure nothing significant was lost in the excavation spoil.



*Plan of trial trench*

The trial trench showed that the interior of the monument had been ploughed, and some late postholes and root hollows were found, possibly relating to garden cultivation of this area. There were three sub-circular shallow pits about 0.8m in diameter but only 0.2m deep. These features had been truncated by the ploughing and were probably originally up to 0.4m deep. They had fairly steep sides and flat bases and it is possible that these were not pits but postholes for large diameter posts. One feature cut through another and if they were postholes suggests one post being replaced by another similar one.



*Section through inner bank*

The inner bank was formed of a yellow-brown stony gravel with some layers containing angular burnt stones. In the top of the bank was a slot with a very straight vertical north-west edge, but unclear south-eastern side. This may have been formed by the bank material dumped against a structure made of organic material, probably wood, that has later rotted or been removed, and it is possible that this slot held a timber palisade. The slot was filled with burnt stones and charcoal. Beneath the bank was a buried soil, only preserved where it was protected by the bank.



*Section of ditch*

The surface remains suggest that the ditch is about 10m wide and about 2m deep. However the excavation showed that there was a considerable berm between the inner bank and the ditch and that the actual width of the ditch was probably no more than 6m. The depth of the earthworks is also confusing because some of the apparent depth of the ditch is caused by the height of the banks. However the excavation showed that the ditch proper is much deeper than apparent on the surface. The topographic survey showed that the outer bank was up to 1m high and considering that much of this must have eroded back into the ditch it is likely that the material dug from the ditch was all used to build the outer bank, with possibly a small amount left to create the inner bank.

Against the south-west side of the trench a deep, steep-sided cut [045] was seen to have been dug into the partly infilled ditch. Along the side of the cut was a line of stones forming a rough revetment. It is suggested that this feature revetted the cut edge and that a building was built within the cut, the remains of which probably survive to the south-west of the trench. It is however possible that the stone feature is essentially part of the gable wall of a semi-subterranean building and that the weight bearing wall was built partly supported on the ditch fill. The later fills of the ditch overlaid the revetment stones, showing that if these later deposits represent ploughing it must have occurred after the proposed building was abandoned.



*Revetment, probably supporting the end of a semi-subterranean building*

Only a few later sherds of pottery were found in the excavation. The metal-detecting survey was no more productive. The majority of metal objects found were items typical of casual loss on a farm and iron rubbish discarded over the years, including part of a bicycle and the blade of an entrenching tool. There were also brass buttons and a badge and a collection of pennies and half pennies of different dates, the earliest being probably a penny of George III. The pennies mainly came from the interior of the site which could have been a place of recreation for the farm workers, where perhaps they played games of chance for pennies or just lost their change from their pockets while resting on the grass. There was, however, nothing to indicate use of the site in the medieval period, nor any nails and other items that might be associated with a timber building.

### **Conclusions**

The current work has clarified many details of the site, but still leaves many other questions. The excavation demonstrated that the ditch is a genuine cut feature and not a relict river channel or other natural feature reused to form the site. It also showed that the ditch was even more substantial than it appears on the surface. The inability of the geophysical survey to detect the ditch meant that it was not possible to demonstrate whether it continues around the eastern and western sides of the site.

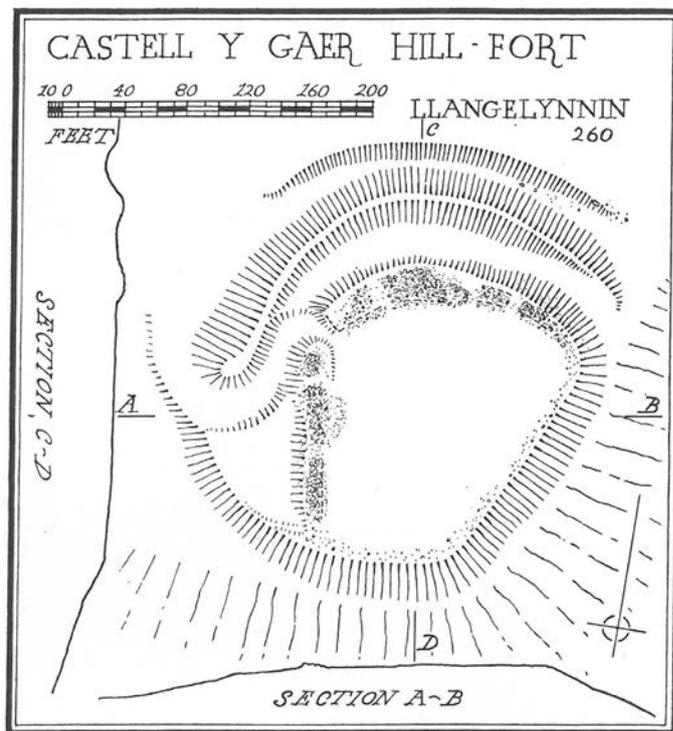
Comparisons of ground levels to the north of the outer bank with the level of the preserved ground surface under the inner bank showed the full height of the outer bank and proved that it was indeed a massive built feature. The outer bank at its full height before erosion and the ditch open to its full depth would have been very impressive, and would have posed a considerable obstacle to anyone trying to access the interior from this side. However the outer bank must originally have been considerably higher than the interior and this would have given a great advantage to attackers with missiles, making the design appear unlikely for a purely defensive function.

If the inner bank is an original part of the monument its presence around the southern side of the interior suggests that this was never circular and that very little of the interior has been lost. The excavation shows that there was activity in the interior and that further remains are likely to survive, but the nature of this activity could not be established in the small area excavated. The presence of burnt stone, charcoal and burnt bone suggests activity producing this material nearby, presumably within the interior, at a time when the inner bank was being constructed.

The excavation also demonstrated later activity in the ditch. The large cut, the end of which was found, suggests a cut for a semi-subterranean building and the revetment found implies the support of loose ditch fills on this side. Although only the very end of this cut was found it appears large enough to have been for a substantial building such as a farmhouse. The location in the ditch of the monument would have provided considerable shelter to the building. The exact form, nature and date of this proposed building cannot be known without further investigation, but it seems probable that it was a predecessor of the current farmhouse. The trackway through the outer bank was probably for access to this building.



*Erw Goch as shown on 25 inch OS map*



*Castell y Gaer as surveyed by Bowen and Gresham (Fig 62 in Bowen and Gresham 1967, 154)*

Hen Gastell is an unusual monument and it is difficult to find parallels to it. There are several defended sites in the area, mainly of Iron Age or Roman period date, but they are all larger and of a different character to Hen Gastell, which has a very small interior area. Perhaps the most similar sites in the wider area are Erw Goch, Eglwys Bach, Conwy and Castell y Gaer at Llwyngwrl near Towyn. Both are built on the end of ridges, using natural scarps as part of the defences. Castell y Gaer has two ditches with a substantial bank between but if the outer ditch had been infilled this site might quite closely resemble Hen Gastell with the bank dominating the interior. It also had a stone wall around the interior, not dissimilar in plan to the inner bank at Hen Gastell, and leading to a gap in the inner wall is a terraced trackway that curves around the end of the rampart, again like the possible track at Hen Gastell.

Erw Goch and Castell y Gaer have not been excavated but are assumed to date from the Iron Age or Roman period and it is most likely that could place Hen Gastell in the same time period. However the site would also work as a partial ringwork around a small wooden keep. This is a very atypical site form for the medieval period but it is worth keeping this possibility in mind and if further investigation is carried out a medieval date should not be ruled out until proven otherwise.

### **Acknowledgements**

The excavation was carried out by a team of experienced volunteers without whose hard work, efficiency and good humour in wet conditions the work could not have been done. The team were Jeff Marples, Clive (Beaver) Hughes, Avis Reynolds, Brian Milner, John Burman and Gareth Jenkins. Archie Gillespie carried out the metal detecting survey with assistance from Beaver. The Trust would like to extend to warmest thanks to all these volunteers who made the project possible. A very large amount of thanks are also due to Tom and Barbara Ellis, the owners and farmers of the land, for their permission to carry out the work and also for their toleration and for allowing us to use toilet facilities and a site shelter.

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