AN EARLY MEDIEVAL CEMETERY AND CIRCULAR ENCLOSURE AT FELINDRE FARCHOG, NORTH PEMBROKESHIRE

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Surveys and excavation were undertaken by the Stones of Stonehenge project in 2014 and 2015 at a site near Felindre Farchog, North Pembrokeshire. The site — a 30m-diameter circular earthwork discovered from the air in 2009 — was investigated for the possibility that it might be a flattened prehistoric burial mound or even the remains of a dismantled stone circle or a small henge. Excavation revealed it to be a circular enclosure and an inhumation cemetery of early medieval type within and around an apparently natural mound. Twenty-one east-west grave cuts were identified, some of which were slate-lined. No human remains have survived in this acidic soil. The only artefact found within a grave was a small blue glass bead likely to date to the early medieval period. The burial ground is likely to date to the period before burial in churchyards became the norm, which could have been as late as the 12th century.

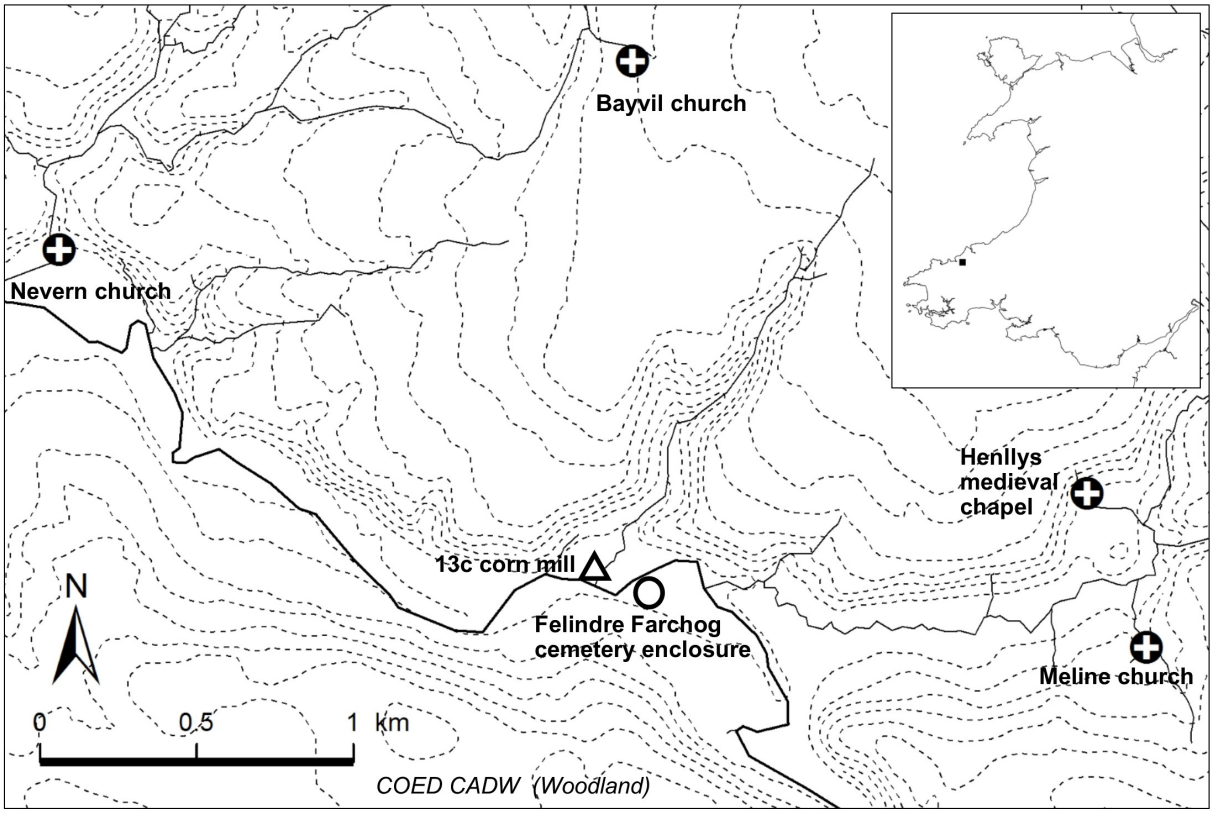

Figure 1. The location of the mound near Felindre Farchog (drawn by Rhiannon Comeau)

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Located almost 5km east of Newport and 8km south-west of Cardigan, this small mound and embanked enclosure (Fig. 1), is situated in the valley of the River Nevern at NGR SN10213893, some 160m south-east of the village of Felindre Farchog but on the opposite side of the river in the parish of Nevern. Currently set in improved grassland on the bluff of the river plain and some 30m from the modern course of the river, it was discovered and photographed from the air by Toby Driver for RCAHMW and described as a small circular prehistoric enclosure of about 25m diameter. It is listed in the RCAHMW's National Monuments Record

as NPRN 413007.

Earthwork survey

By Mark Bowden, Rebecca Pullen and David Field

An analytical earthwork survey of the site was carried out in September 2014 (Bowden *et al.* 2015). Features mentioned in the text are labelled A to E on the survey drawing (Fig. 2). The earthworks comprise part of the circuit of an embanked enclosure with maximum dimensions of 30m across, with a mound placed eccentrically to the north-west (A) (Fig. 3). The above-ground relationship between bank and mound is unclear because of recent disturbance.

Figure 2. The 2014 earthwork survey, with locations of Trenches 1 and 2 marked (after Bowden et al. 2015, fig. 2)

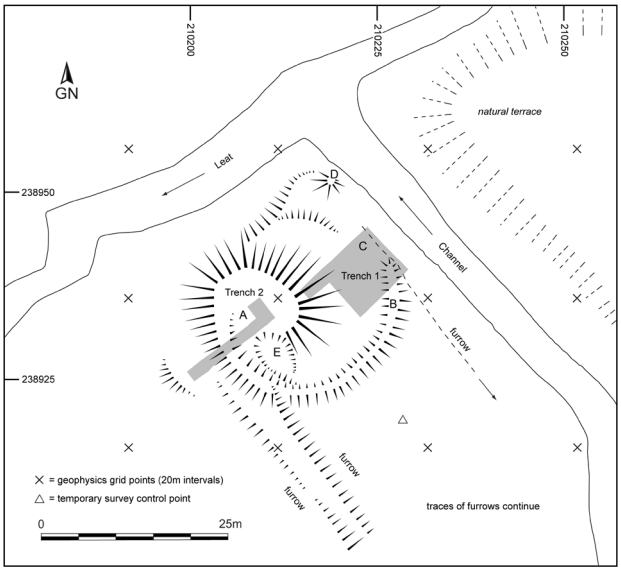

Figure 3. The embanked enclosure viewed from the north, showing the sinuous leat in the foreground and geophysical survey being carried out across the mound beyond (photo: Rebecca Pullen)

The enclosure comprises a bank (B) up to 4m wide reaching some 0.4m high externally and 0.2m within. No trace of an accompanying ditch was observed. In the north-west is a terminal that may mark the position of an entrance (C),

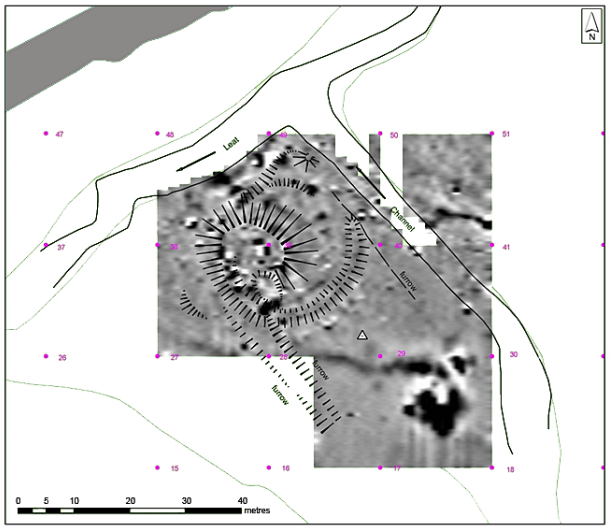

Figure 4. Magnetometer survey at 1m intervals

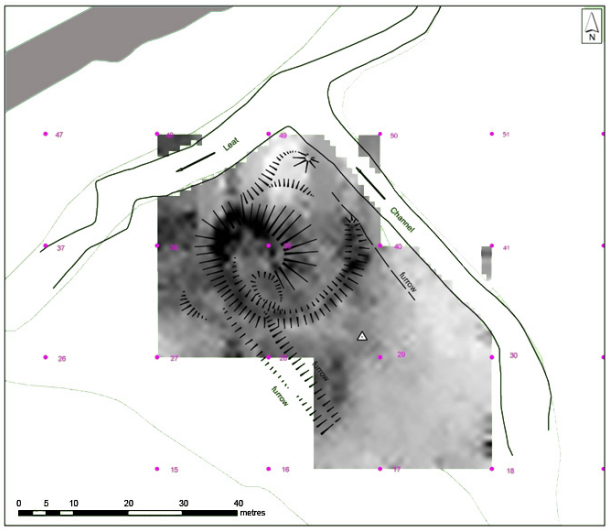

Figure 5. Resistance meter survey at 1m intervals

but this is uncertain because ploughing across the feature has obscured it. Set hard against the bluff some 10m to the north is a small low mound (D) that appears to be a remnant of a continuation of the same bank.

A 4-5m wide gap separates the bank from the mound, except in the west where the bank appears to rise and merge with the mound. The two are difficult to disentangle, not least because of a 4m-wide modern gouge that cuts into the mound (E), possibly the result of turning the plough or perhaps of localised robbing or removal of a small structural feature. The mound itself is more oval than round, reaching a maximum of 20m across, and measures 0.7m in height, although the impression of height is enhanced when viewed from the north because the feature merges imperceptibly with the river bluff.

Plough ridges and furrows, some quite prominent and oriented in a NW-SE direction, in addition to blurring the earthworks, have truncated the base of the mound and bank

in the west. Their orientation is dictated by the presence of a water course, 5-6m wide, that may have originated as a spring-fed natural channel supplying water to a former leat set on the river flood plain at the base of the river bluff. Today this leat is some 7m wide but partly silted and the water that it holds is likely to result from natural drainage. Originally it was fed from the river by means of a weir; this point of entry from the river, along with traces of an earlier stone weir structure, are still visible a short distance south-west of the modern concrete weir (Bowden *et al*. 2015).

Approximately 100m to the north-east a further undulation set in a similar position overlooking the floodplain may represent a comparable site, although this is more severely damaged by cultivation and appears only as an amorphous low mound.

Geophysical survey

By Charlene Steele and Kate Welham

Geophysical survey, using both a Bartington 601 fluxgate gradiometer and a Geonics RM15 resistance meter, was also undertaken in September 2014 (Figs 4 and 5). The results were largely inconclusive but both methods reveal the line of the circular enclosure, especially on its south-east side.

Figure 6. Trenches 1 (left) and 2 (right). North is to the lower left (photo: Adam Stanford)

Archaeological excavation

Aims, objectives and methods

Two trenches were excavated in September 2015 (Parker Pearson *et al*. 2014 and 2015), aimed at establishing the nature and date of the circular enclosure, its relationship to the mound within its interior, and the survival of any features within the enclosure's interior (Fig. 6).

1. A trench (Trench 1), 9m SW-NE x 8m SE-NW (with a 2m x 3.5m extension in the south corner), was dug within the south-east sector of the circular enclosure to establish whether its entrance was located in the east (as suggested by the earthwork and geophysical survey results), to allow sampling of the enclosure ditch and bank, and investigation of part of the enclosure's interior to investigate whether features such as stone holes might be located there and, if so, in what configurations (Figs 7, 8 and 9).

2. A trench (Trench 2), 1.5m NW-SE x 13.8m NE-SW

Figure 7. Trench 1 before excavation of features. North is to the upper right (photo: Adam Stanford)

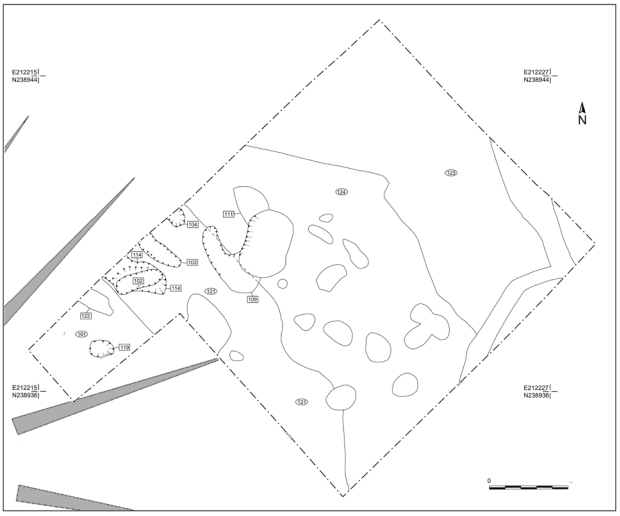

Figure 8. Trench 1 (drawing by Irene Deluis)

(with a 2m x 2m extension in the north corner), was dug within the north-west quadrant of the circular enclosure to clarify the stratigraphic relationship between the enclosure and the mound, and to attempt to obtain dating evidence and environmental samples from the mound, the enclosure features and any buried soil that might survive beneath the mound (Figs 10, 11 and 12).

Topsoil (context 100 in Trench 1 and context 200 in Trench 2) was removed by mechanical excavator, and all archaeological contexts were excavated by hand. Twenty-one graves were identified during the excavations; all were found to be oriented east-west, and were found in both Trenches 1 and 2. Of the total number with cuts visible on the surface, only a small proportion was excavated. These were in the west corner of Trench 1, and at the two ends and centre of Trench 2 — areas that were targeted to determine whether or not the mound was of natural formation. Excavation of graves was kept to a minimum so as to leave as many as possible available for future research.

The mound

The mound recorded in the earthwork survey is located off-centre to the circular enclosure. Upon excavation it was found to be composed of rounded, river-worn cobbles (up

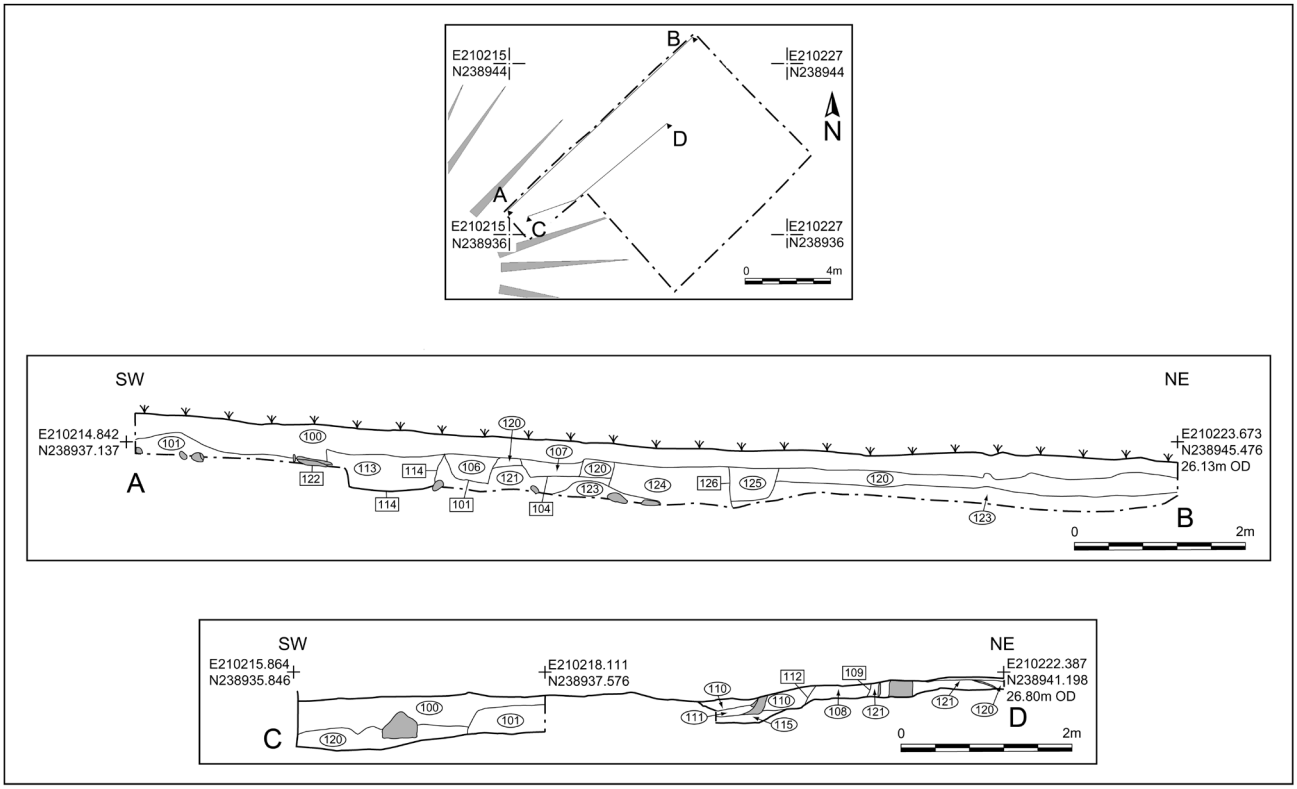

Figure 9. Trench 1 section drawings (drawing by Irene Deluis)

to 0.25m in size) set within a varying matrix of cemented, multi-coloured sand and gravel (contexts 101, 121, 123, 217 and 218). It is probably an entirely natural feature which served as the focus for an early Christian burial ground. Several burials were cut into it: 104, 217, and two unexcavated graves identified to the south-west. However, the steep south-west side of this feature is composed of firm, fine, light grey gravel (217) that is either a natural gravel hummock or is bank material deposited by human agency to enhance this side of the mound. This is the same place in the south-west where the bank earthwork appears to ride up onto the mound, as recorded by the earthwork survey (Fig. 3). An unexcavated grave cuts into context 217 so, if this is a constructed feature, it pre-dates the burials.

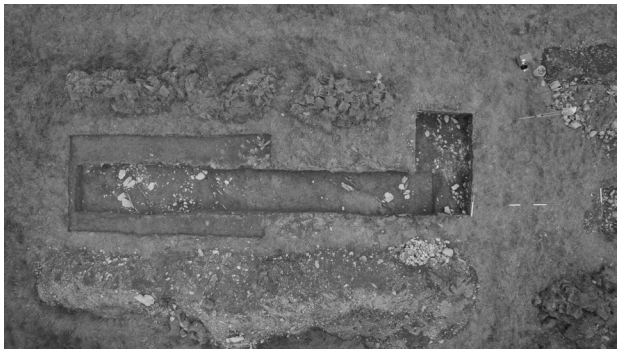

Figure 10. Trench 2 before excavation of features. North is to the upper right (photo: Adam Stanford)

The circular enclosure

Although this feature showed up so clearly on the RCAHMW's aerial photographs AP 209 0470 & 0471 as a ditch-like ring and, less clearly, in the geophysical plots, and is marked on the ground by the presence of a low arc of earthen bank, it was extremely difficult to locate during excavation. It survived in Trench 1 as a low bank of friable

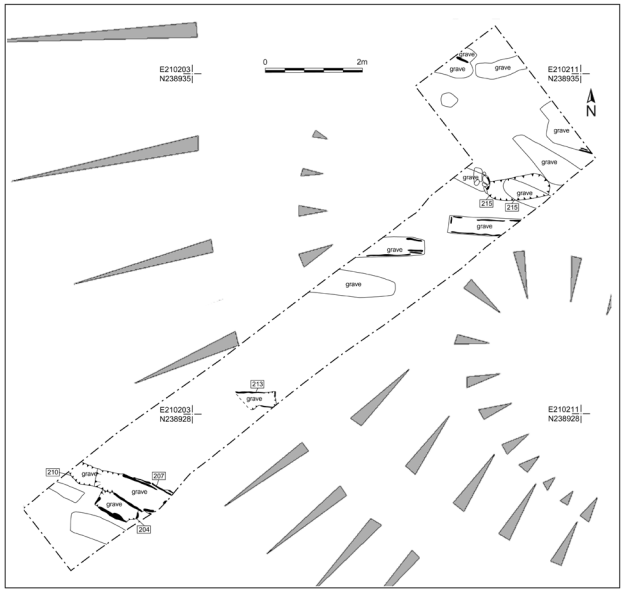

Figure 11. Trench 2 (drawing by Irene Deluis)

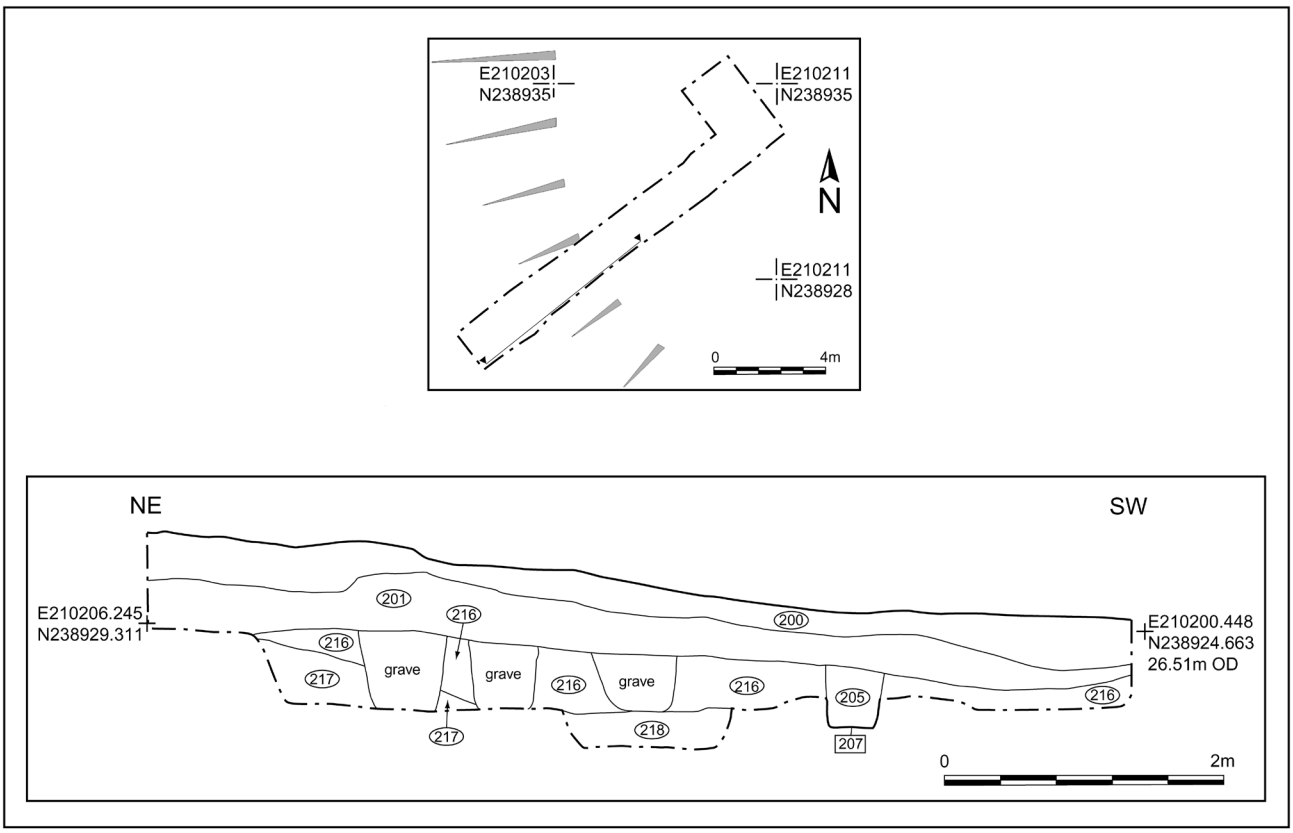

Figure 12. Trench 2 section drawings (drawing by Irene Deluis)

orange-brown silt with cobbles (124) about 4.5m wide and up to 0.4m high in Trench 1; however, the upper part of this bank has probably been ploughed away and no associated ditch was identified. There was no sign of it in the south-west end of Trench 2 within the steep break of slope at the foot of the mound, which (as mentioned above) was composed of light grey gravel (217).

The excavated burials

A total of 21 grave cuts were identified, twelve of which were excavated. No human bones or teeth have survived in the acidic soil. Four of the graves (122, 204, 207 and 213) were of slate-lined 'long cist' type (Fig. 13); eight were of unprotected dug type (102, 103, 104, 114, 119, 126, 210 and 215). The dimensions of one of the slate-lined graves (204), and possibly one of the dug graves (119), suggest juvenile burials. One of the dug graves (103) produced a tiny blue glass bead (SF1; Figs 14 and15) from halfway along its north side. This was the only find identified in the excavation, other than a small piece of fuel ash slag in the fill of grave 102, of a type produced by high temperatures in bonfire contexts rather than in metallurgy.

Figure 13. Graves 204, 207 and 210, viewed from the west-southwest.(3D photographic image created by Adam Stanford)

Other features

Two tree throws (109 and 112) were also identified.

Discussion

In all, 14 grave cuts were observed in Trench 2, of which 5 were part-excavated. The 7 excavated or part-excavated in Trench 1 are likely to represent only a portion of those present in that trench; numerous other features were observed in Trench 1 but not excavated though most were too small and irregular in shape to be graves. Given a likely extent of the circular enclosure of around 80sq m, the distribution of at least 21 within the excavated part of the enclosure (approximately 35sq m) suggests the possibility that the whole enclosure contains at least 50 inhumations. The spatial distinction of those graves with and without slate linings raises the possibility of this cemetery having areas reserved for different groups of dead, although some degree of chronological distinction is also a possibility (Longley

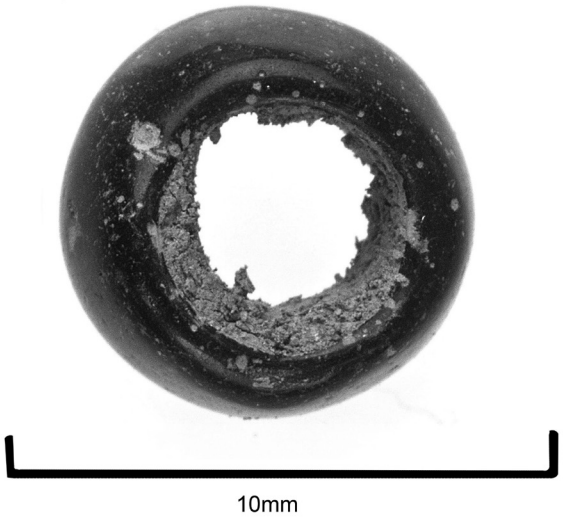

Figure 14. The blue glass bead from Grave 103 (photo by Ken Walton)

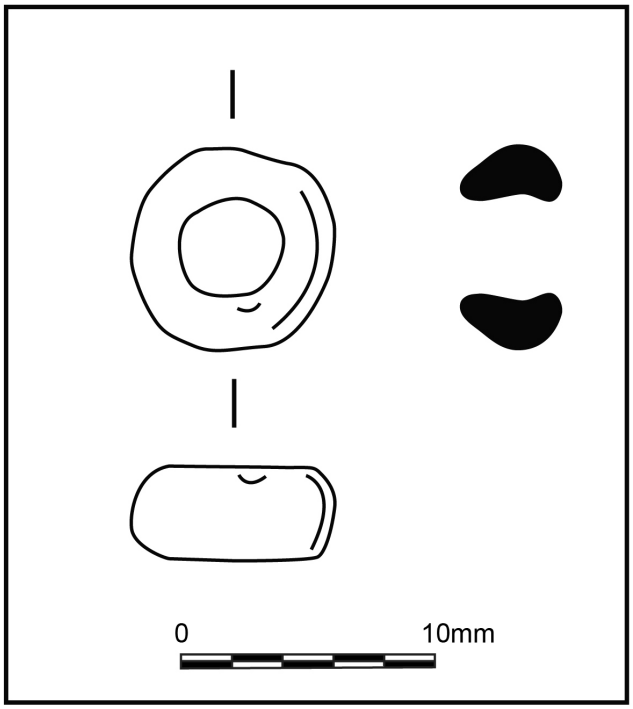

Figure 15. The blue glass bead from Grave 103 (drawn by Irene Deluis)

2009, 106, 112). Unfortunately, none of the adult graves was recovered in their entirety, making it impossible to compare grave lengths other than for the two infant/child burials.

The burials appear to be focused on the mound, with several cutting into it. Yet two burials were excavated beyond the south-west foot of the mound (with another two likely grave cuts here left unexcavated) so the cemetery may have extended well beyond the mound and the circular enclosure. The use of both prehistoric and natural mounds as foci for early medieval burials is well attested (Longley 2009, 120, 126; Ludlow 2009, 70; *cf* Semple 2012, 48, 52). The relationship of the burials with the enclosure bank is less clear and would merit further investigation. The possibility should also be considered that the mound could have been used as a setting for local assemblies; there are, for instance, traditions elsewhere in Wales of preaching mounds in burial grounds (*e.g.* CPAT NPRN 6342; 100985).

The earthwork survey provides some indications of the date of the enclosure bank. If the bank indeed once formed a circuit then its north-eastern part must have been truncated by an earlier course of the River Nevern and such a process would indicate an early, probably prehistoric, date ((Bowden *et al*. 2015, 5). Being situated asymmetrically, the mound serves to add further complexity. In the earthwork survey the mound and bank appear to subsume each other, with the bank being visible for almost the height of the mound, leaving the impression that the bank is more spiral-like, leading to the summit and is thereby contemporary with or, more likely, later than the mound (*ibid.*). Excavation revealed that one grave (unexcavated and therefore unnumbered) was cut into the material of the mound at the point where – from surface earthworks evidence – it appears to join the bank to the south-west. It is possible, therefore, that the bank pre-dates the burials, though further excavation would be needed to establish this conclusively, particularly since excavation did not find clear evidence of the bank here.

The presence of the leat next to the site is intriguing, for it implies the presence at some point along it of associated structures such as a mill, though these perhaps lie within the woodland immediately to the west where suggestions of a possible terrace and channels are visible as earthworks close to where the leat enters the wood (*ibid.*). This is especially interesting since the medieval mill of the Lord of Cemais was located on the opposite (north) bank of the River Nevern, within the hamlet of Felindre Farchog (Charles 1992, 138). However, it should be noted that the river forms the parish boundary, likely to be a long-lived association. As a result, the enclosure itself lies south of the river within the parish of Nevern, and so was probably not part of the Felindre Farchog holding. Records and a 'Coed Cadw' place-name indicate that the land around the site on the south side of the Nevern was woodland, used for pannaging and underwood, in the medieval period (*ibid*, 135).

Dating of the site is necessarily broad and contextual. The blue glass bead could date to as early as the mid-first millennium AD but is more likely to date to the early medieval period when a range of blue glass beads were in use, particularly in the 6th-7th centuries AD (Brugmann 2004, 74, figs 77-8). The stone-lined 'long cist' style of the burials is generally associated with the early medieval period though there are recorded instances of high medieval long cist burials (e.g. at Eglwyswrw nearby; Longley 2009, 108-9; Ludlow 2009, 69-70). Some indications of date are provided by the site's isolation from any church. No church is recorded at the site itself or at Felindre Farchog — the

nearest churches are at Meline and Bayvil, both about 1.6 km away. This burial ground must therefore date to a period before burial in churchyards became the norm. This could — given the evidence of sites like Capel Maelog — be as late as the 12th century AD (Longley 2009, 125–6).

Acknowledgements
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