

Field Journal Llanllyr 2026



Image 1: Excavation site at Llanllyr facing north (Stewart, 2026 a)

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Site Overview

The site of Llanllyr (an infilled glacial lake) is situated in West Wales in the Aeron Valley approximately 7 miles from the coast at Aberaeron (Portalis, 2026 a). It is currently a working farm that previously housed a water bottling plant. The site has a known medieval presence of a Priory of Cistercian Nuns (Murphy, *et al.* 2017). However, what was being investigated was Mesolithic human interaction with the landscape. Previous investigations carried out by the University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD) and the Portalis Project unearthed flint tools dating from the Mesolithic and Neolithic periods (Portalis, 2026 b). This year's trench excavations were carried out in fields surrounding the initial excavation looking for further evidence of Mesolithic activity.

Digging Trench 21

Choosing a location

Previous excavations had focused on a mound in a different field to the south-east of Trench 21. One way to explore the history of a site is by viewing the flora (Carver, 2009 pp. 93). Trench 21 was also placed on a mound that may have been a refuge from the water of the glacial lake (Portalis, 2026 a). There is a raised treeline acting as a field boundary to the south with reeds surrounding the turfed mound to the east, west and north. Reeds grow here due to it being wetland (Wildlife Trust, 2026).



Image 2: Trench 21 with treeline and reeds in the background (Stewart, 2026 b).

Laying out the Trench

A pole is placed to indicate the location of the trench by the Site Lead (Martin Bates). Then place nail 1 next to the pole. One person measures across 3m with a measuring tape; another person measures 4m up from nail 1. Then the person at 3m holds another tape at 0 and another person runs the tape diagonally to the person at 4m. Pull the tapes tight until the diagonal measures 5m. This utilises Pythagoras's theorem to create a 90-degree angle. The trench needed was 6m by 2m therefore nail 2 is placed at 2m on the 3m line. The 4m tape is then extended to 6 metres and nail 3 placed at 6m. Measure 3m across from nail 3 and another person measures down 4m. Connect diagonally to 5m by pulling tapes tight. Then place nail 4 2m on the 3m line from nail 3 (Connolly, Unknown). See Image 3 for diagram. String is then wound tightly around the nails to create an outline. A piece of tarp is placed next to the trench for the loose soil and turf.

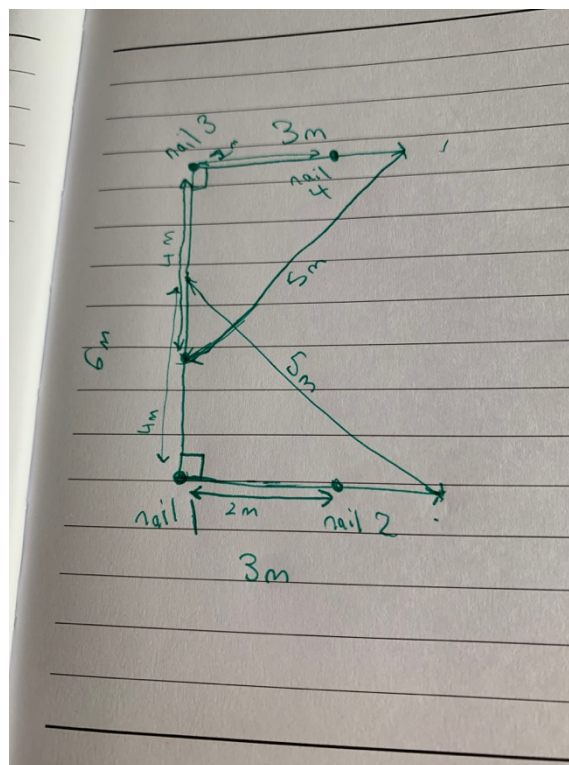


Image 3: Diagram of how to lay out a 2m by 6m trench using the Pythagoras's theorem (Stewart, 2026 c)

Removal of Turf

The first task after laying out the trench is removing the top layer of turf. Cut a line across the 2m trench line using a spade. Then cut another line parallel to this a spade width apart. This section is now cut into squares and removed, see Image 4. Repeat until all turf is removed. The squares of turf are placed on the tarp around the outside, see Image 5. To keep the turf from drying out, they are placed with grass up then a second layer of turf with grass down. This continues to alternate grass up and grass down until all turf is out. Due to the proximity of the trees, tree roots made it difficult to remove some sections of turf, so some areas were shallower.



Image 4: Removal of turf from Trench 21 (Stewart, 2026 d)



Image 5: Turf on tarp (Stewart, 2026 e)

Tree Roots



Image 6: Tree roots removed from Trench 21 (Stewart, 2026 f)

During the 10-day excavation period, roots from the treeline to the south had to be removed using a mattock and handsaw. Image 6 shows all the tree roots removed from Trench 21 during the excavation. Tree roots can also result in displacement of archaeological material meaning artefacts cannot be reliably dated via stratigraphy (Forest Research, 2026).

Taking Levels

Levels of the site were taken using a Dumpy Level and measuring staff. A Temporary Bench Mark (TBM) (an old fence post) was set at 100m above sea level. The tripod is set up with the dumpy level using the levelling bubble to the height of the smallest person in the group. The Backsight reading is taken and added to the TBM figure to get the instrument height. Then decide where in your trench you taking readings (13 in Trench 21) mark these on your plan. Take readings using the measuring staff. To find the reduced levels you take measurement from the instrument height (Connolly, Unknown).

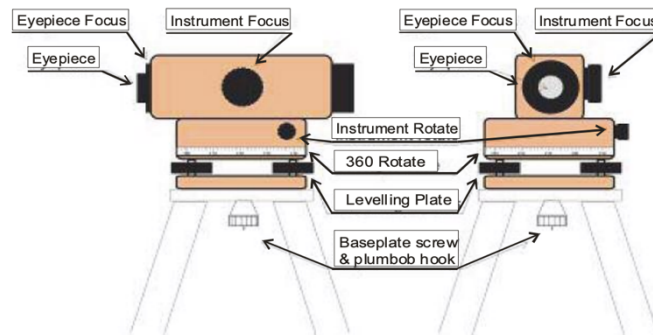


Image 7: Diagram of Dumpy Level (Connolly, unknown)

Drawing Plans

Plans are a primary record of the site and are drawn on tracing paper over graph paper. Both the section plan and trench plan are drawn at a 1:20 scale with the site code (LLYR26), date, trench number (TR21), the north point and the scale written on the top of the plan. The trench edges are indicated by a dash and two dots. The trench plan includes a line separating the trench into two, the artificial step and the land drain. The section plan is of the north section wall and looks at the different contexts within the soil. Both plans have the levels written on them using a Bench Mark symbol and a legend. Image 8 shows incomplete plans of Trench 21.



Image 8: Incomplete plans of Trench 21 (Stewart, 2026 g)

Context Sheets

Context Sheets (see Image 9) show the different stratigraphic contexts encountered during the excavation. Each context has a different number starting with the trench number followed by 000 e.g. 21000 then 21001. There are natural and man-built soil deposits. Trench 21 contained both as a u-shaped ditch had been cut for the ceramic land drain and infilled, see Image 10. To complete the context sheets the soil needs to be described, the components of soil are clay, sand and silt. The presence of clay can be tested by adding a little water and seeing if it clumps together; clumping is indicative of clay.



Image 10: Ceramic Land drain with infill on top (Stewart, 2026 i)

Silt will leave a stain when pressed against skin. Sand feels gritty between fingers. When describing soil, an ascending scale of the components is used. It is also important to note the texture of the soil (friable, loose or compact) and any inclusions (stones, roots ect). On the context sheets, excavation types and method are noted. The context is then placed within a matrix to show what is above and below it. Types of finds are also recorded along with the interpretation of the context.

Image 9: Context sheet (Stewart, 2026 h)

Backfill

On the final excavation day, if the trench is not going to be reopened next year, all the soil removed is placed back in the hole and compacted down in layers. The turf is re-laid, see Image 11.



Image 11: Re-laid turf (Stewart, 2026 j)

Finds from Trench 21

Unfortunately, all finds did not relate to the Mesolithic period and are likely all post medieval.

Domestic

The majority of the finds are of domestic origin. Mainly consisting of pottery and a ceramic head. Image 12 is a small shard of purple pottery glazed on both sides, likely post medieval.



Image 12: Purple pottery shard (Stewart, 2026 k)

Images 13 and 14 are of a small, cream pottery handle with red crackled glaze, likely post medieval. Images 15 and 16 are of the same pottery type as Images 13 and 14 with a brown bird design. Images 17 and 18 are again of the same type but with an edge design of stars. Images 19 and 20 also appear to be the same pottery type with blue streaks along an edge. It is unclear if these belong to the same piece or separate pieces of a set.



Image 13: Cream pottery handle with red crackled glaze (Stewart, 2026 l)

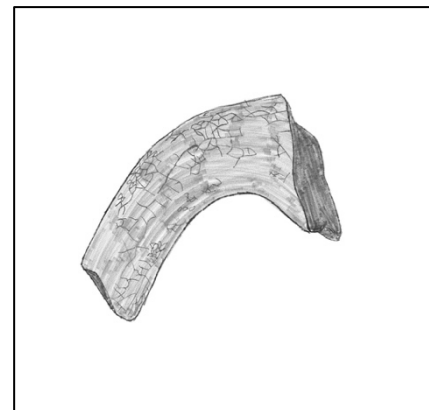


Image 14: Drawing of Cream pottery handle with red crackled glaze (Stewart, 2026 m)



Image 15: Pottery with brown bird design (Stewart, 2026 n)

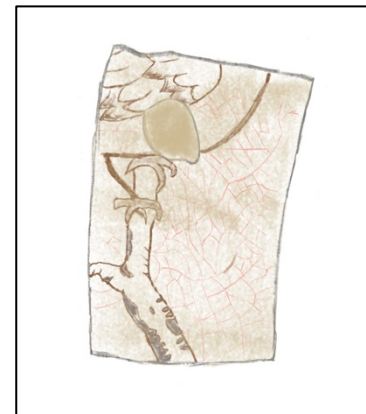


Image 16: Drawing of Pottery with brown bird design (Stewart, 2026 o)



Image 17: Pottery with edge design of stars (Stewart, 2026 p)



Image 18: Drawing of pottery with edge design of stars (Stewart, 2026 q)

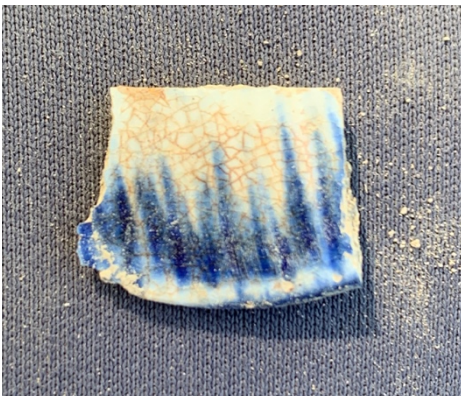


Image 19: Pottery with blue streaks on edge (Stewart, 2026 r)

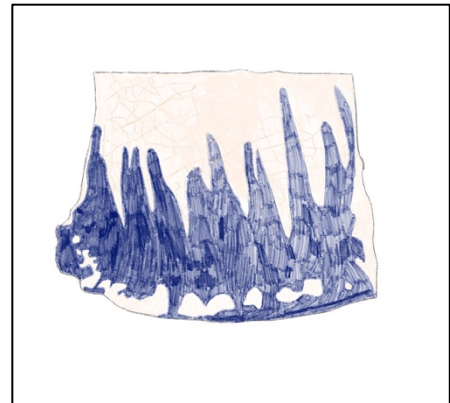


Image 20: Drawing of Pottery with blue streaks on edge (Stewart, 2026 s)

Images 21 and 22 are a solid ceramic head possibly Victorian and may have been sewn into a fabric body.



Image 21: Ceramic head (Stewart, 2026 t)

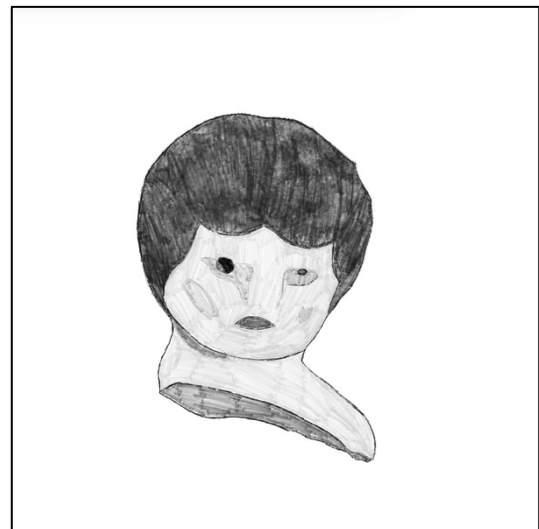


Image 22: Drawing of ceramic head (Stewart, 2026 u)

Agricultural

There was significantly less evidence of agricultural activities, however there two iron harrow spikes were found which are used to break up soil to cultivate the land (Britannica, 2026). Image 23 shows one of the harrow spikes and Image 24 shows other pieces of iron that may have been agricultural, however the pieces are unidentifiable.



Image 23: Iron harrow spike (Stewart, 2026 v)



Image 24: Iron pieces (Stewart, 2026 w)

Personal Reflection

Before the beginning of the excavation, a pit of dread sat heavy in my stomach, the source – uncontrollability and unpredictability. Everything from the weather to the farm's livestock can impact the timing and experience of an archaeological excavation. These are all outside of the control of the archaeologist, which can cause frustration. This anxiety did not dissipate during the excavation so showing up for all ten days was a real personal achievement, especially as I struggle in team situations. The dig showed me that I was capable of working well within a team despite my concerns. Helping organise my teammates to ensure everyone was involved and had adequate rest breaks was a valuable skill to learn. This excavation has highlighted my personal ability to step outside of my comfort zone, even when it is extremely difficult. Having said this, the excavation has reinforced by desire to work more within the heritage or museum sphere after the completion of my degree.

Conclusion

Despite not uncovering Mesolithic flint, the excavation of Trench 21 at Llanllyr in 2026 proved valuable in teaching excavation methodology. From turf to turf the process was completed. Overcoming obstacles is an important aspect of archaeological fieldwork, for an example the tree roots proved a bit of a nuisance to remove. The skills the excavation covered included laying out a trench with Pythagoras's theorem, using the dumpy level and drawing plans. The finds found are interesting artefacts even though they do not correlate to the period hoped. The most important part of the excavation was the experience.

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Images

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- Stewart, R. (2026 a) *Excavation site at Llanllyr facing north* [photograph]
- Stewart, R. (2026 b) *Trench 21 with treeline and reeds in the background* [photograph]
- Stewart, R. (2026 c) *Diagram of how to lay out a 2m by 6m trench using the Pythagoras's theorem* [diagram]
- Stewart, R. (2026 d) *Removal of turf from Trench 21* [photograph]
- Stewart, R. (2026 e) *Turf on tarp* [photograph]
- Stewart, R. (2026 f) *Tree roots removed from Trench 21* [photograph]
- Stewart, R. (2026 g) *Incomplete plans of Trench 21* [photograph]
- Stewart, R. (2026 h) *Context sheet* [photograph]
- Stewart, R. (2026 i) *Ceramic Land drain with infill on top* [photograph]
- Stewart, R. (2026 j) *Re-laid turf* [photograph]
- Stewart, R. (2026 k) *Purple pottery shard* [photograph]
- Stewart, R. (2026 l) *Cream pottery handle with red crackled glaze* [photograph]

Stewart, R (2026 m) *Drawing of cream pottery handle with red crackled glaze* [digital drawing]

Stewart, R (2026 n) *Pottery with brown bird design* [photograph]

Stewart, R (2026 o) *Drawing of pottery with brown bird design* [digital drawing]

Stewart, R (2026 p) *Pottery with edge design of stars* [photograph]

Stewart, R (2026 q) *Drawing of pottery with edge design of stars* [digital drawing]

Stewart, R (2026 r) *Pottery with blue streaks on edge* [photograph]

Stewart, R (2026 s) *Drawing of pottery with blue streaks on edge* [digital drawing]

Stewart, R (2026 t) *Ceramic head* [photograph]

Stewart, R (2026 u) *Drawing of Ceramic head* [digital drawing]

Stewart, R (2026 v) *Iron harrow spike* [photograph]

Stewart, R (2026 w) *Iron pieces* [photograph]