

Field Journal - Llanllyr April-May 2024

This essay will talk through the process of excavating the site of Llanllyr, Talsarn in April and May 2024. The excavation concentrated on the Neolithic and Mesolithic era therefore we did not take much notice of the possible Cistercian nunnery or the evidence of Roman activity found at the site. I will be including finds that were discovered at this excavation and in previous excavations to decipher what the Mesolithic people were doing on this site and how they lived.

Our first task was to find notable differences between the higher ground near the north entrance of field one and the lower boggy ground to the south. The obvious difference was the type of grass between the grounds. The higher ground was what I would call normal grass. It was very uniform and turf like. The lower ground however boasted a dense patch of reeds that swirled across the field. We were told that the boggy lower ground was actually the evidence of a former lake and river that ran through the valley. I have never thought about different grass or plants being a remnant of past eras and landscapes before. I now find it hard to resist imagining former landscapes when I go about my daily life. We are told that the valley we were in and the lake that once stood was formed by last ice age. The last significant modification to the land would have been around 30,000 years ago as a consequence of a major ice flow at the start of the holocene (Glasser et al. 2018).

As we talk about mound one, which we are standing on at the north end of field one, we discuss the findings of trench four in a previous excavation. Some burnt stone was found in the trench and it is explained to us that burnt stone is often found by streams due to Neolithic and Mesolithic people often settling down by water sources. Radiocarbon dates were collected from the sediment of trench four and it was dated as 3004-2784 and 2873-2627 cal BC. A sample of oak charcoal from the same trench were dated at 2857-2496 and 2465-2239 cal BC (Brummage et al. no date). We can tell by the dating that this is evidence of Neolithic activity at the Llanllyr site, and they would very likely have made use of the water source in this valley.

As flint has been found on site over the last few excavations, we discuss why the flint is important evidence of human inhabitants. We are told Wales has no natural occurring flint therefore any that is found is a sign that humans have brought it to site. The assemblage found at Llanllyr in previous years is dominated by material of a honeyed red-brown colour and the likelihood is that they have been collected at the nearest beach which is at the mouth of the valley at Aberaeron, or in local depositional exposures such as rivers or stream beds (Brummage et al. no date). More than likely, the flint found at Llanllyr had washed up on Welsh beaches after the erosion of Irish Sea till which was caused by the rising sea levels (Brummage et al. no date). A flint microlith was found at the 2023 excavation and it is explained that it is one of the characteristics of the last hunter gatherers.

We discuss where the best places to dig trenches would be. It is explained to us that most artefacts are found two to three metres into the dry ground as that is often where Mesolithic and Neolithic people would settle. Our group chooses a patch on the south end of field two where there is a clear dip with reeds and a flat elevated dry ground. We decide to take Martin's advice and roughly mark out a trench that begins in the reed river

bed and continues out a couple of meters onto the dry elevated ground. It is possible to figure out where the edge of the lake is by test pitting, which works for prehistoric sites.

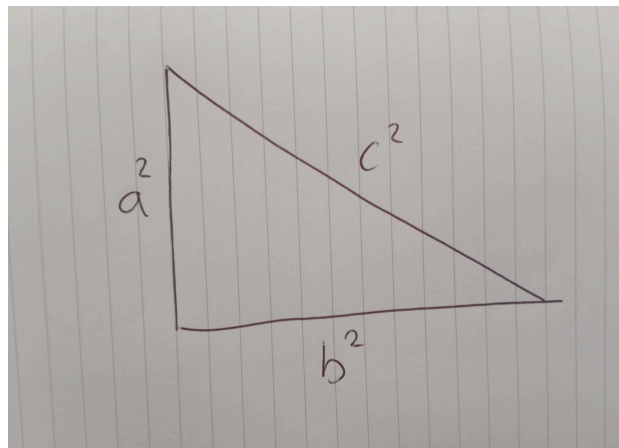
As an earlier excavation has already test pitted near our chosen area, we already know where peat was found and we were told the radiocarbon dating of the peat was around the middle bronze age, 3000BP.

We are also told that a large piece of oak and gravel was found in one of the two test pits done in this area. The radiocarbon dating found they were around 2000 years old, dating around 100BC-60AD. Martin's interpretation of the finds are that the romans might have been doing something at this site but a bigger trench would need to be dug to see. Since we are concentrating on the Neolithic and Mesolithic eras, we move to a previously excavated trench that is of interest to us, trench ten. This is located on the north side of field two, on mound two.

Martin measures out 50m and we are told to walk it, counting our steps to roughly estimate how many it takes to reach that distance. I took 57 steps which will come in handy in the future I'm sure.

We go on to learn about how to measure and dig a trench. The way to get right angles for trenches is the dreaded Pythagoras' theorem.

$$A^2 + b^2 = c^2$$



We measure out three metres for our A side, four for our B, five for our C. Then we repeat the process for the other side of the trench. We go on to string all four pegs to form the rectangular trench. We are told not to stand or place heavy objects on the edge of the trench as it will compact the soil. We will need to read the section of the trench later on.

Our group were told that we would be extending trench 10 as that is where most of the flint has been found in earlier excavations. We extend the trench by two metres on each side of the trench, peg and string it, and start to deturf.



Deturfing trench 10b

While deturfing, we place the turf on a tarpaulin and around the sides, making a turf wall across the long end of the trench. This is to make it easier to back fill at the end of the dig. To deturf, we mark out squares that are roughly a foot squared and use a spade to dig up the top layer. We start deturfing too deep so it is suggested to us that we should start trowelling through some of the deep turf to check for any artefacts. As soon as we do that, we go around the edges, making sure not to undercut the string.

As I was trowelling after lunch of day two, through all the stones and quartz, I saw a reddish flake with white specks at the west side of the trench. I immediately put a peg in where it was found. We were told to not pick it up immediately as it's important to note where the artefacts are found so we can map out the trenches. Although the urge to grab it and show everyone was fierce. I take the flint to Martin and Sam and they both confirm that it is indeed flint and that it was the first find of the excavation. I walk over with Sam to the tent where we bag up the flint and jot down the information on the bag. As it was an early find, there weren't any context sheets to fill so that would have to be done at a later date. She explains that as we haven't measured the depth of the find yet, I should continue trowelling and leave a plinth where the peg is.



Trowelling trench 10b

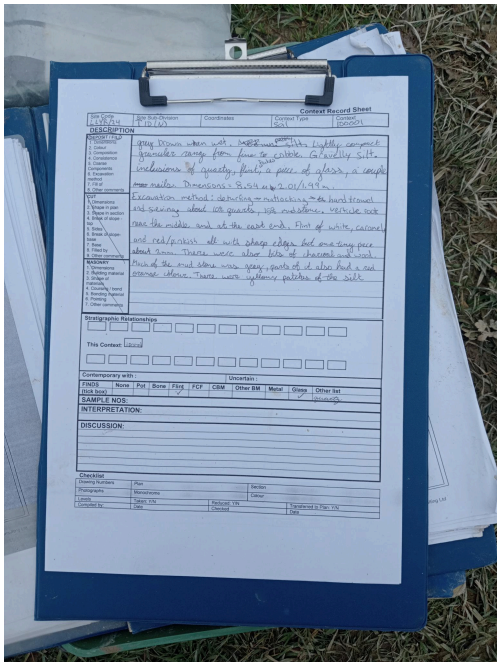
Clay Mounds -
possible evidence of ploughing



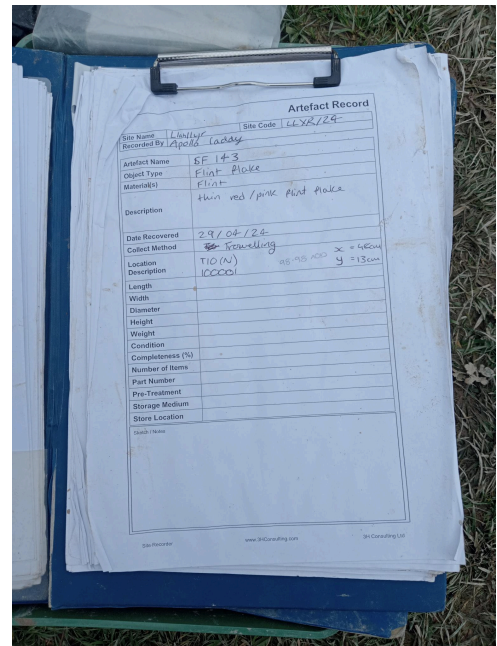
As I missed a week of excavating due to other commitments, I returned to the site for the last week of excavation to find that over 30 pieces of flint had been found since I was away. Apollo and the rest of the group had mapped out all the finds and had filled in all the context sheets which allowed us to start creating a map. We continued trowelling around the pegs and the clay mounds which we were told were possibly the outcome of ploughing during WWII. The clay itself is a sediment and is evidence of deposits travelling into this land. As we learnt in our soil and sediment class, clay is made of very fine particles and it is carried much easier than other sediments. As this is the case, the settling of clay means the water that carried it must be still or moving at a very slow pace, such as a lake. This is most likely the outcome of the last ice age, with the water travelling down the valley and settling as a lake at the Llanllyr site. The presence of silt and clay at this site is evidence of a minerogenic wetland that has access to groundwater and so benefits from waterborne nutrients. Minerogenic wetlands often host a plethora of wildlife and biodiversity due to its abundance in nutritious plants. These include molluscs, fish and waterfowl to name a few (Van de Noort et al. 2006). This would have attracted Mesolithic and Neolithic people to this lake as well as the sheer size of it and the possible evidence of hunting, fishing and wildfowling is found in the material at this site (Linking Ireland and Wales. 2022).



Flint found at trench 10b



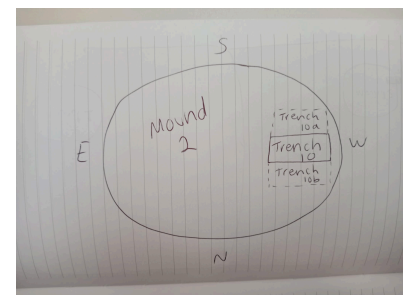
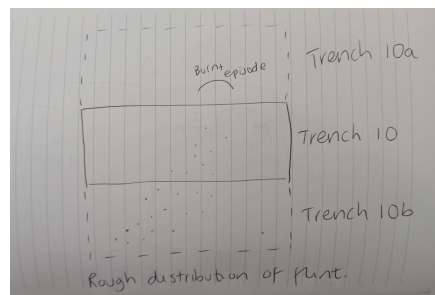
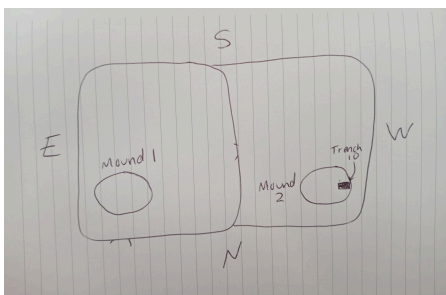
Context record sheet for a find



Artefact record for a find

Looking at the map of artefacts for trench 10, 10a and 10b, we can see a pattern of flint flakes that start at a burning episode in 10 and 10a and goes in a line towards the north east of 10b. It seems that whoever was knapping flint here, may have been sitting with their backs to the fire, facing towards the north east. We can say with some certainty that these flint flakes have not travelled from somewhere else as the pattern they have been found in is an obvious straight line. The flakes themselves are also sharp and we would expect some smoothness and roundness to material that has been moved through the land.

As the evidence so far suggests, Llanllyr was not a main settlement for Mesolithic and Neolithic people. The absence of scrapers, awls or piercers indicates a short term, season specific use of the site (Brummage et al, no date) although it might also be a part of a more permanent area that has not been excavated yet. Hopefully we can go back next year and gather more information to learn about the lives of Neolithic and Mesolithic people at the Llanllyr site.



Diagrams of Mound 1, Mound 2 and the distribution of flint found

References

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