

Field journal

Llanllyr, near Talsarn Ceredigion is an archaeological landscape which has been shaped over time by prehistoric, medieval and post medieval activity. Excavations that have been done have revealed evidence ranging from Neolithic artefacts to remains that are associated with the medieval cistercian nunnery founded under Rhys ap Gruffydd in 1180.¹ Excavations being done at this site hope to find more evidence suggesting Neolithic presence in the valley and develop on artefacts already found.

There were around fourteen people on this dig all being students from the University of Wales Trinity Saint David, we arrived and split into groups of three to four. I was put into



a group with four people and we were allocated a plot near the boundary, which was labelled trench 21. The trenches were all 6 metres long and 2 meters wide, to make sure the corners were right angles we had to use pythagoras theorem, three across four down and 5 metres diagonally connecting from the bottom of four and the edge of three to make a 90 degree angle. Using six inch nails and luminescent rope for the edges² used to mark the boundaries of our plot.

Next we gathered tools from the tent, spades, a mattuck and a shovel, we were instructed to take the top level of turf off to expose the soil underneath. To

³keep the turf from drying out we had to put grass on grass and soil on soil. We took turns with two people digging the turf into blocks and the other taking the blocks, this was to stop us from getting too tired. This day was shorter than the rest as we got to Llanllyr around 11 am due to stopping in Lampeter to drop off our bags.



Llanllyr is a prehistoric excavation site surrounded by the valley Aeron, the site would have been a lake during the ice age, the terrain is majority flat with woodland scattered sound. Trench 21 had no reeds and was plotted on a slope compared to the other trenches which had reeds and was flat.

Findings from the first day were only quartz which is a very common mineral, the soil profile for usually finding quartz is silty and or sandy, often meaning a very well drained area.

¹ N.d.-c. Gov.uk <<https://coflein.gov.uk/en/sites/700011>> [accessed May 21, 2026].

² Image by Kayla Bird.

³ Image by Kayla Bird.

The rest of the excavation we were picked up from Lampeter around 9 am and we didn't finish till 4pm. Day 2 started and we finally could mattock, however we ran into a problem, due to how close we were to the boundary of the trees, tree roots were everywhere. The tree roots hindered us massively leaving us mattocking until there were no little to no roots but this however wouldn't stop till near the end of the excavation. The roots we were encountering were so thick that we had to wait till the next day before a saw was brought to us, so we used the spades and mattocks to dig around these roots. Roots were also a problem for us, as we were primarily looking for



flints and other Neolithic tools the roots would displace the artefacts and possibly move them further down that what we were expecting. Martin, the supervisor of the excavation site, instructed us to level out our trench as much as we possibly⁴ could without sawing the tree roots. After a full day of mattocking and shoveling out the soil our bodies were exhausted and we didn't want to see another root again.

Day 3 was the same however we had another tool, a saw, this made it so we were able to saw out the tree roots and give us a more level trench, this went on for days, mattocking and cleaning up the trench by shoveling out the soil and sawing roots. By this time the soil profile was beginning to change into pockets of clay, every time we

thought we had for definite hit clay the soil would come back, this possibly was due to the disturbance of the roots moving and displacing the soil. The findings were different, charcoal, shards of pottery and quartz. The pottery was glazed and suggested more modern, possibly early late 19th century to early 20th century pottery, the charcoal suggests fires had taken place and with the abundance of pottery it could have been a bonfire. The weather was cold and wet in the morning and around midday sunny and warm in open areas, as the trench was in the shade it remained wet and cold.

The next few days had the same routine mattocking the upper silty level of soil till we reached clay, and there was an exact definition between the layers. Leveling was introduced to our trench, leveling is an essential surveying technique which is used to measure and record differences in height across the⁵ excavation site. This process allows archeologists to get accurate elevations for contexts, features and artefacts in



⁴ Image by Kayla Bird.

⁵ Image by Kayla Bird.

relation to a fixed benchmark. Using a wooden post as our sea level marker we were 71.87 meters above sea level, and using a leica dumpy level or trench was 72.02 metres above sea level. Next marking our 4 corners.

1. 1.44 metres
2. 1.37 metres
3. 1.84 metres
4. 1.87 metres

Findings over this time were a ceramic doll's head, harrows, quartz, charcoal, pottery, iron, and slate. The discovery of a ceramic doll's head and fragments of pottery provides evidence for domestic activity within the landscape. Unlike flints or prehistoric tools, this offers insight⁶ into the everyday lives of the people who occupied or used the site. The ceramic dolls head could indicate the presence of children in the household environment which suggests that part of the site functions as domestic living spaces rather than purely religious or agricultural areas. The pottery fragments were mostly glazed ceramics are commonly associated with cooking, storage and food consumption. This find gives us an interpretation into the patterns of daily life, occupation and social activity within the landscape. The presence of domestic artefacts shows how Llanllyr has evolved over time from a neolithic, medieval ecclesiastical setting into a domestic and agricultural environment.



Day 8 our trench was split in half as we had the task of digging through the soil as much as possible. The supervisors wanted to see the sections and layers of the soil and a 6 by 2 metre trench was too much to dig out fully. We had finally reached clay at the bottom half of the trench and now had to level out fully. Using a mattock to distress the soil and a shovel to get rid of the soil and put into the pile. During this we uncovered a ceramic pipe, possibly put there in the 60s and looks to be a drainage pipe for the field. Our task was then to uncover the pipe fully using trowels to carefully remove soil and clay around the pipe. Day 9 was the same leveling out the area fully across the trench and cleaning up the sides with a spade. Using the spade to dig up soil was a lot easier than mattocking as we could go deeper and on a slope it took less energy allowing us to not exude all our energy.

The soil profile was beginning to change from top soil to deposits of pebbles and clay, with two different colours. Near the top of the trench the clay was an orange colour, orange clay has high levels of oxidized iron which makes sense as primarily iron was found



⁶ Image by Kayla Bird.

⁷near the top half of the trench. Orange clay also suggests good water drainage, as the water can easily spread through the soil. Often the soil is more dry and crumbly which was the case for the top half. Grey clay the soil is water logged most of the year, the water displaces the oxygen causing iron not to oxidize.⁸



Day 10 was the last day working on the excavation site, me and another person were tasked with helping trench 20 backfill their trench. My task was to level and stomp⁹ down the soil as much as possible so the turf blocks would be able to fit back into the trench.

Once trench 20 was finished back filling the rain was too much to work in so we all went back to the tent for 40 minutes, once the rain had calmed down we had 13 level points in our trench and had to take levels for all of them. Backfilling took around three to four hours including breaks and lunch, we had some help backfilling as our trench was the deepest roughly just over half a metre down.

In conclusion, the excavation of Llanllyr demonstrated a multi period archaeological landscape that has been shaped by centuries of human activity. The evidence uncovered during fieldwork including neolithic artefacts and medieval remains, pottery fragments and domestic objects reveals the long term significance of the site within the Aeron valley.

⁷ Image by Kayla Bird.

⁸ “BGS Lexicon of Named Rock Units - Result Details.” n.d. Bgs.ac.uk
<<https://webapps.bgs.ac.uk/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?pub=LC>> [accessed May 21, 2026].

⁹ Image by Kayla Bird.

