



# Archaeological Excavation at Clee Burf, Clee Liberty 2022



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# Introduction

This report has been produced by Matt Williams of Fearn Heritage and Archaeology as part of the Our Upland Commons Project (OUC). It describes the results of archaeological investigations at Clee Burf (hereafter the 'Site') in the south east of Clee Liberty Common.

The fieldwork was carried out from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> June 2022. All work was carried out in accordance with the Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI) prepared by Fearn Heritage and approved by the landowners, Clee St Margaret Parish Council.

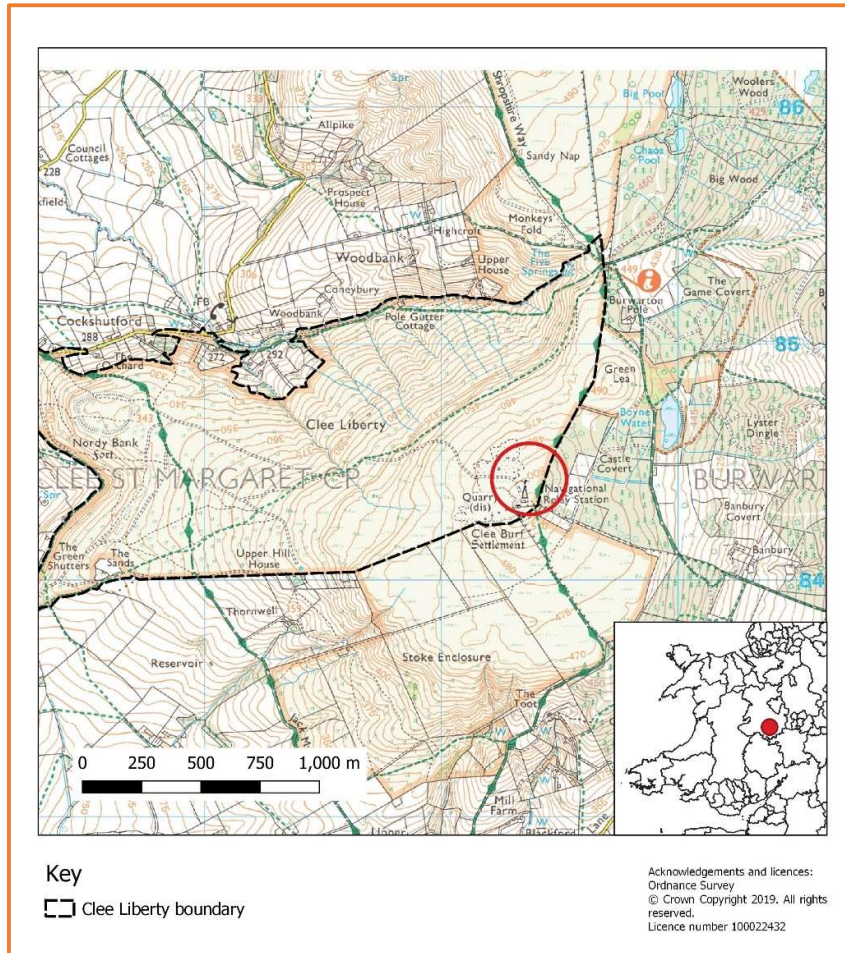


Figure 1 – Site location

Thanks are due to all the volunteers who carried out the repair work, excavation and recording: Polly Bolton, Guy Cholmeley, Clive Fisher, Nicky Fisher, Greg Forster, Ian Heighway, Mariel Lubman, Judi Major, Chris Moore, Claire Nicholson, Bernard O'Connor, Gary Trim, Helen Paris, Chris Thom, Pamela Thom, Lucy Wells and Rob Woods.

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# Site Background

## *Geology*

The geology of Clee Hill comprises lower Devonian Old Red Sandstone and upper Devonian Old Red Sandstone (Maughans Formation). On Abdon Burf and Clee Burf the sandstone is overlain by Carboniferous Limestone (BGS, 2021) and some coal deposits which have been protected from erosion by deposits of Olivine Dolerite, a very hard igneous rock known locally as 'Dhu Stone' (Rosenbaum and Wilkinson 2005). The coal, limestone and dolerite have all been mined or quarried to some extent in the past.

There are no superficial (overlying) deposits recorded in the BGS (2021). However, clay deposits were recorded at the top of Clee Burf in Trench 4 (see page 14).

## *Location and topography*

The Site is located in the south east of Clee Liberty (Figure 1). It is the highest point of Clee Liberty, at just over 500m AOD.

The ground slopes fairly steeply down to the north, east and south with a low ridge running north east to Green Lea. A track runs west from the Site across the Common to Nordy Bank.

## *Site conditions*

Much of the southern and western hillfort was destroyed by quarrying in the 20<sup>th</sup> century; however, the undisturbed bell pits and associated spoil heaps are in good condition and are easily visible in the short grazed grassland. Several pits have been backfilled with large rocks but most have simply silted up; these can be unstable and quite dangerous.

# Aims

Two trenches were excavated into bell pit spoil heaps and two trenches were excavated through boundary banks.

The aims of the spoil heap excavations were:

1. to gain information on the excavation method of the pit by examining the stratigraphy of the spoil heap
2. to obtain an organic sample for C14 dating from below the spoil heap.
3. to recover artefacts that may help date and interpret the pits

The aims of the bank and ditch excavations were:

1. to record the profile of the bank and ditch
2. to obtain an organic sample for C14 dating from below the bank.
3. to recover artefacts to enhance our knowledge of the Common

A further trench to examine the sand extraction pits near The Sands, in the south west of the Common, was also proposed. This trench was not excavated due to time constraints.



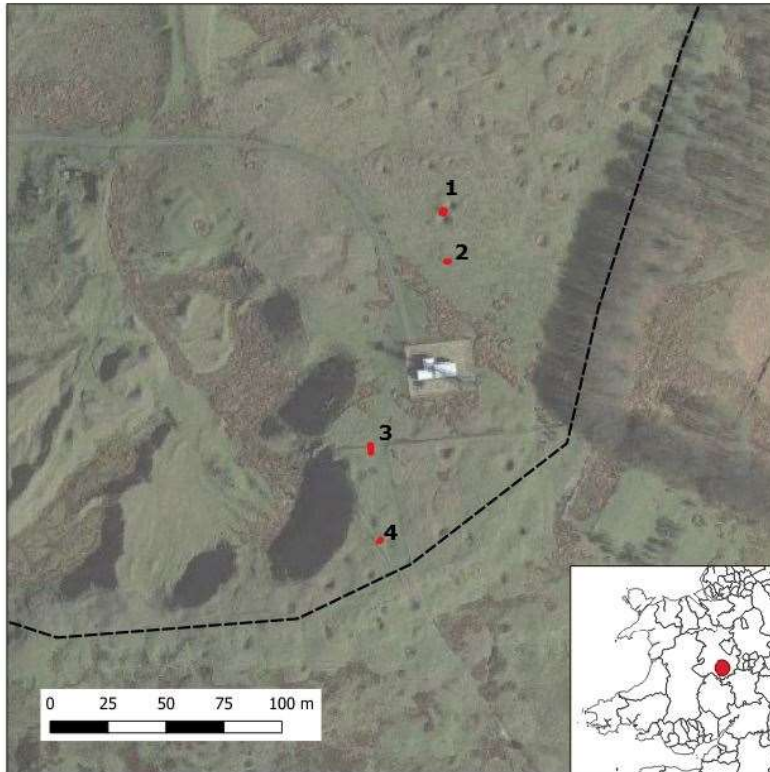


## Method


A full description of the archaeological methodology is within the WSI (Fearn Heritage 2022).

Trench 1 was moved to the Trench 2 location as shown in the WSI, and Trench 2 was moved to a spoil heap further south. This was because the new Trench 2 bell pit had been backfilled and was safer, therefore allowing us to excavate closer to the pit edge.

The trenches were excavated and recorded as described in the WSI.



Key

 Clee Liberty boundary

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*Figure 2 – Trench locations*



## Historic background

This section is summarised from the Landscape Assessment (Fearn Heritage and Archaeology 2019) and focusses on the Medieval and Early Post Medieval period of the Common.

It is not known when Brown Clee hill was first established as common land although, like many commons, it probably emerged from the political landscape and common rights that grew during the Early Medieval period (Rowley 1970). The parish boundaries on Brown Clee were created during this period (Rowley 1970, 51). Clee Liberty forms the eastern part of the parish of Clee St Margaret and is abutted by six parishes; the boundaries radiate out from the summit of Clee Burf in the southeast where Clee St Margaret, Burwarton, Loughton and Stoke St Milborough join, and the low point in the northeast where Clee St Margaret, Abdon, Earnstry, Cleobury North and Burwarton join. The design of the boundaries ensures each parish has access to upland waste for common land. This is especially evident in the parishes of Earnstry (Diddlesbury) and Cleobury North, where long fingers of the parish extend south to join Clee Liberty. These parishes meet in the small valley between Clee Burf and Abdon Burf and numerous footpaths and tracks are still evident at this point.

The parish boundaries clearly divide Clee Burf into quarters; it is noteworthy that the coal deposits appear to be equally divided and there is access to the smaller basalt deposits. (the use of the stone within the hillfort on the summit of Clee Burf demonstrates that the stone was already known and exploited). The boundaries infer that coal and stone may have been important resources to be shared equally between parishes, even during the Early Medieval period. Two substantial banks defining the parish boundaries can be identified on the ground and from aerial photographs. Both are c2m wide with a ditch on either side. The date of construction cannot be determined, however they both cut the hillfort ramparts and the Stoke St Milborough/Loughton boundary appears to cut across a bell pit, suggesting a Medieval date at the earliest.

Clee Liberty was within a Royal Forest, which Rowley suggests was created prior to the Norman invasion (1970, 51). The exact boundaries are not known but a study of towns that enjoyed rights on Brown Clee Hill as a result of having been part of Clee Forest indicate that it extended far beyond the modern boundaries of Clee Liberty in all directions (Rowley 1970, 51).

Assize Rolls from the 12<sup>th</sup> century show that the 'waste soils' of Clee were being 'assarted' (taking ownership of a parcel of land) by lords of the manor, monasteries and some prosperous peasants (Rowley 1970, 52). It is difficult to recognise land that has been taken in this way but it undoubtedly led to the shrinking of the common. The common has concave sides which funnel out along roads, indicative of land which no-one had responsibility to fence (Rackham 1986, 141) and which has been slowly encroached upon over many years.

The threat of a reduction of common land and rights for commoners during this period may have led to the production of the 'Description of Clee Soyles' in 1612. This document clearly states the different rights of the intercommoners (those who lived in villages adjoining the common) and strakers (those who lived within the Clee Forest but did not have direct access to the common). The intercommoners had standard rights of common on the lower, richer slopes, whilst the strakers were only permitted to graze cattle or sheep, and had to graze their stock on the poorer pasture on the upper slopes.

In 1260 De Clifford gave a grant to assart which also gave a license to 'dig coal to sell it or give it away'. The coal deposits are located on Clee Burf and this may indicate the erosion of the common at the east end where coal pits are visible both within Clee Liberty and beyond; they are especially dense in Loughton. Coal working is evident in all the parishes on Clee Hill (HER 06996). Coal extraction during this period was confined to small scale 'bell pits' evidence for which can be seen all around Clee Burf. It is difficult to date the bell pits as there is no clear local



typology and none have been archaeologically excavated. The visible remains may be much later, or earlier, than the 13th century documentary references.

## Results of Archaeological Excavation

### *Trench 1*

Tr1 measured 1.90m E-W and 2.40m N-S. It was located on the west facing slope of a large spoil heap between two bell pits. After removing the topsoil, only the northern half of the trench was excavated.

The lowest deposit was natural geology consisting of fragmented rock within a dark brown silt clay matrix (101). This is common across the hill and is the result of freeze thaw of the limestone bedrock. Overlying this was 0.10m – 0.20m of mid brown orange coarse silt with no visible inclusions (102) which was the original turf buried by the spoil heap. This deposit was sampled to retrieve a C14 date but no suitable material was recovered.

Overlying (102) were a series of deposits representing the excavated material from the bell pit: the lowest deposit (overlying the buried turf) was a 0.15m thick mottled dark yellow orange clay silt (103), then a 0.12m thick mixed grey silt with orange clay silt inclusions (104), then a 50mm thick mottled pale/dark grey coal silt (105) overlain by a 100mm thick mid grey silt (106). At the top of the sequence was 50mm turf (107).

These are interpreted as the natural sequence of deposits in reverse order as they were excavated, ie (103) is the excavated topsoil, followed by the mixed topsoil/coal deposits (104) and the coal waste deposits (105) and (106).

Two finds were recovered from the topsoil (107): one fragment of thin rolled metal which looks decorative – perhaps part of a bucket rim or handle (plate 2), and one rusted iron fragment.



*Plate 1 – Trench 1 excavated to buried topsoil (103) lkg SE. 2 x 1m scale.*



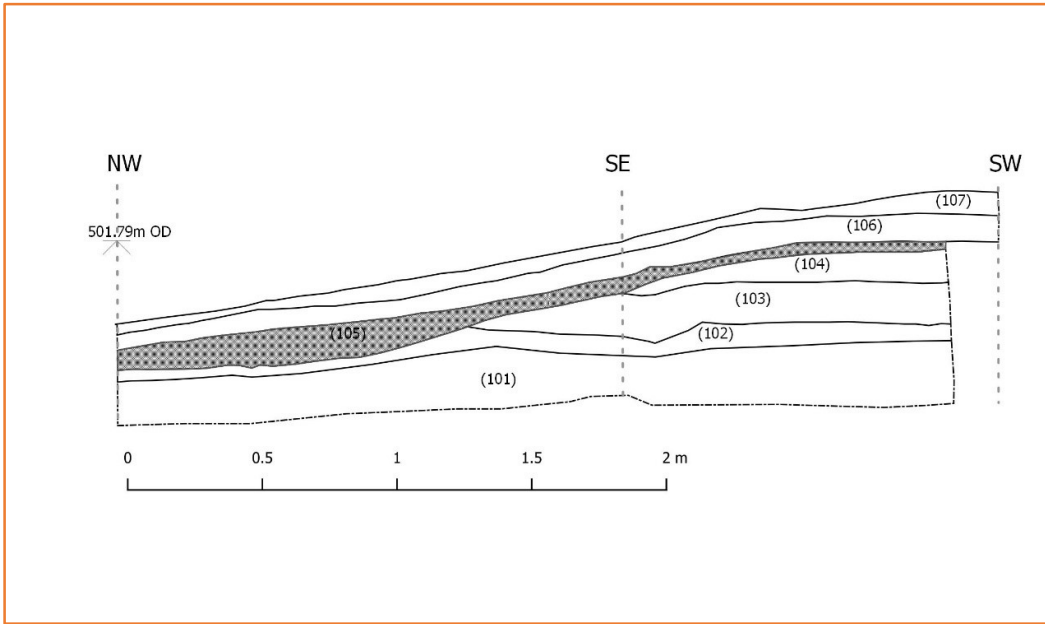


Figure 3 - Trench 1 section



Plate 2 - Metal object from topsoil (107) Trench 1. Scale in cms.



## *Trench 2*

Trench 2 measured 2m E-W by 1m N-S. It was located across the end of another bell pit spoil heap. The bell pit had been backfilled and stabilised with large stones and therefore it was possible to cut the trench closer to the edge of the pit.

At the base of the deposit sequence, cut into the natural silt (201), was a N-S ditch 1.15m wide and 0.36m deep [202]. It was filled with a primary fill of brown orange silt with frequent stones (203) which formed a low bank, and a secondary fill of pale brown yellow clay silt (204) which butted up against the stones. Ditch [202] was sealed by the old topsoil (205) which had been buried by the spoil heap. Although the ditch was directly below the spoil heap it is unlikely that the two features are related as they are separated by the buried topsoil. The trench is located within the hillfort enclosure (as recorded on the 1<sup>st</sup> ed. OS map prior to the quarrying) and the stone bank and ditch may be an Iron Age structure; it may also be a later boundary, although it would have to pre-date the Medieval period as the land was a common by this period and therefore could not be enclosed. There is also the possibility that it is a natural feature.

The spoil heap comprised pale yellow brown clay silt (206) overlain by a mid brown grey silt containing occasional coal fragments (207) and a pale brown silt with occasional stones (208). As in Trench 1, these represent the natural sequence of subsoil and coal deposited in reverse order as they were excavated by the miners. The spoil heap was sealed by topsoil and turf (209).

There were no finds from any of the deposits.



*Plate 3 - Trench 2 looking NE, general view*



*Plate 4 - Ditch [202] and stone bank (203). 1m scale*



Plate 5 - Trench 2 fully excavated showing S facing section. 1m scale.



Figure 4 - Trench 2 plan, ditch [202] not excavated.

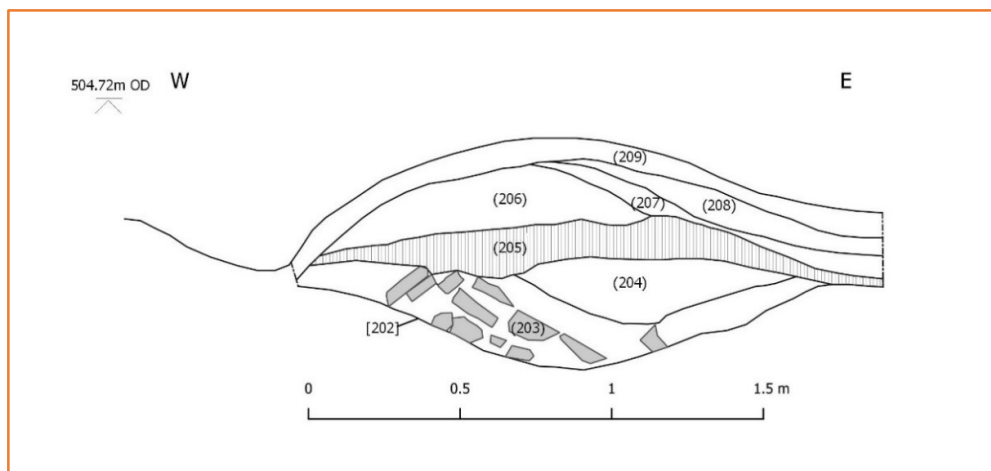


Figure 5 - Trench 2 S facing section.



### *Trench 3*

Trench 3 was located over the Cleve St. Margaret and Loughton parish boundary bank. It measured 4.20m N-S and 1m E-W, although excavation concentrated on the northern 1.70m after the topsoil had been removed.

At the base of the sequence was mid brown orange silt with large angular stones (301), this is the natural geology as seen in Trench 1. This was cut by the boundary ditch [302] on the north side of the bank. The ditch was not fully exposed or excavated but it was over 0.80m wide and 0.30m deep. The upcast material from the ditch had been used to create the bank – it consisted of pale orange brown silt with occasional angular pebbles (303), orange silt (304), yellow orange clay (305) and friable mid brown silt clay (306). The surface of the bank had been covered in c.200mm angular pebbles (307). This would have made the bank very visible in the landscape.

Some bank material (308) had washed down the northern face of the bank and just into the ditch [302]. This was overlain by a dark brown grey humic silt (309) which filled the ditch. The uppermost fill of the ditch was a pale yellow grey silt (310). The bank and the ditch were sealed by topsoil and turf (311).

There was no clear buried topsoil below the bank and therefore no sample for dating was taken. There were no finds from the trench.



*Plate 6 - Trench 3 general view looking NW. Stone layer (307) clearly visible on side of bank.*



*Plate 7 - Trench 3 looking S. Ditch [302] filled with dark silt (309) in foreground cutting stony natural geology (201). 2 x 1m scales.*



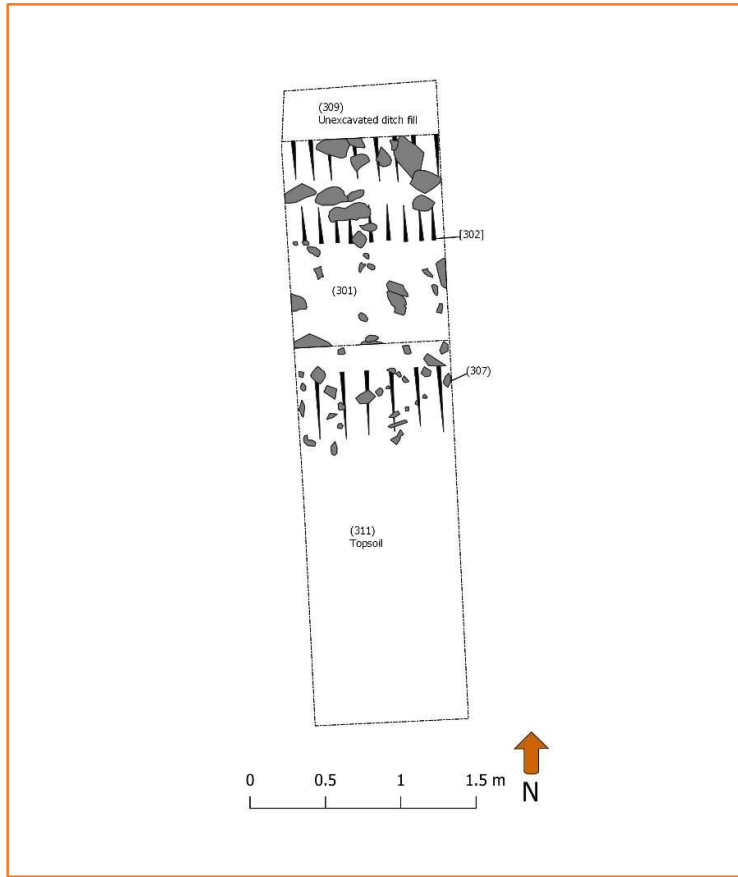


Figure 6 - Trench 3 plan

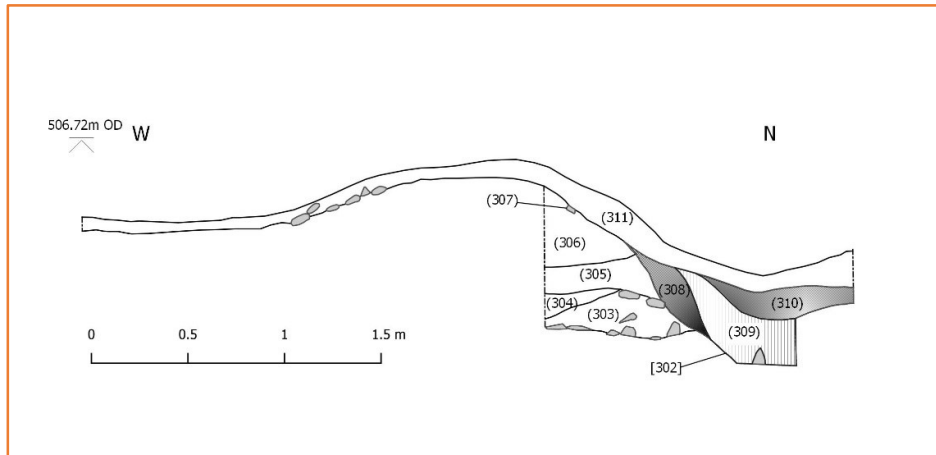


Figure 7 - Trench 3 E facing section





### *Trench 4*

Trench 4 was located across the Stoke St Milborough and Loughton parish boundary bank and a bell pit spoil heap. The earthworks showed that the boundary clearly cut the spoil heap.

The earliest deposit was a silty clay coal (401) mixture – this appeared to be an undisturbed deposit rather than upcast material from the bell pit. This was overlain by a thick dark grey blue clay (402), an orange clay (403) and, on the east side, a pale grey white clay (404). The lower clay deposits (402) and (403) were compact and homogeneous, whereas (404) was friable and very dry and is therefore interpreted as redeposited/upcast material.

(404) was cut by a small gulley or boundary ditch [405], 250mm wide and 200mm deep; it was filled with a dark brown grey silt clay (406) which had built up naturally within the feature. On the west side this was overlain by a pale grey white very dry repositied clay (407) which formed the boundary bank. The latest deposit in the trench was the turf and topsoil (408).

The geology is completely different to that in the other trenches, comprising of blue, grey and orange clay rather than the stony brown orange silts seen elsewhere. The spoil heap material appears to be the same composition as the boundary bank and does not contain any coal residue. The section supports the interpretation of the earthworks i.e. the boundary ditch cuts the spoil heap. Some boundary bank material has eroded down over the boundary ditch. There were no finds from this trench.



*Plate 8 - Trench 4 looking NW. 1m scale.*



Plate 9 - Trench 4 SW end looking S showing redeposited white clay (407) overlying dark clay (403). 1m scale.

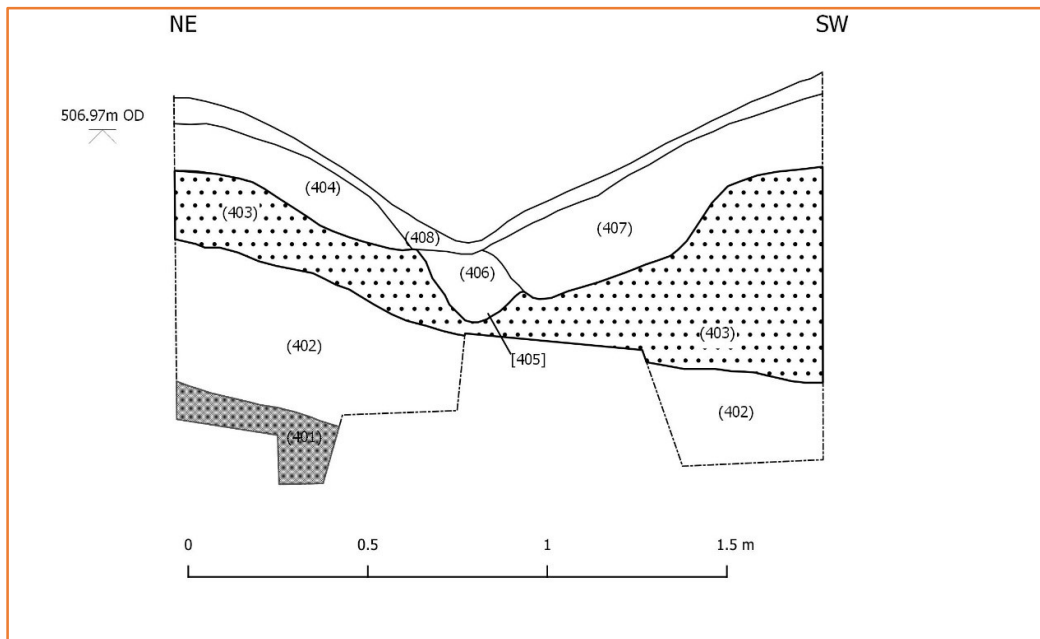


Figure 8 - Trench 4 NW facing section.



## Discussion

Trenches 1 and 2, through bell pit spoil heaps, revealed a sequence of deposits that reflected the excavated material as it came out of the bell pit, ie. soil at the base, overlain by a mixture of soil/coal silt and finally coal silt. The decorative ironwork rim and rusted metal from trench 1 may be related to mining but may also be casual loss, as both were in the topsoil close to the surface rather than within the spoil material. Unfortunately no suitable material for C14 dating was retrieved from the topsoil below the spoil heap, and therefore the pit could not be dated.

The ditch and stone bank in trench 2 represent a phase of activity pre-dating the bell pit. Some time separates the bank construction and the spoil heap as about 80mm of topsoil had built up over the bank before the spoil was deposited. Given that the trench is within Clee Burf hillfort, it is possible that the bank is an Iron Age structure. It is unlikely to be a later boundary as it is on common land that could not be enclosed. However, the bank is made from the natural geology i.e. large angular stones and orange brown silt, and it is possible that it is a natural feature.

The boundary bank and ditch in trench 3 is a simple construction where the excavated ditch material has been used to create the bank. It is interesting that the bank, once completed, was covered in a layer stones. These may have reduced erosion on the exposed soil and made it more visible. The boundary bank in trench 4 was constructed from the upcast clay from the nearby spoil heap but there was no evidence for stone covering. There was no dating evidence for the bank although it appears fairly well preserved, suggesting a late Medieval date or later. No clear buried topsoil layer was recorded below either bank and therefore neither could be sampled for C14 to date the construction.

The geology in trench 4 is clay; there are no records of clay on the Clee Hills but alluvial material including clay is found in the valleys (BGS 2022). It is surprising that the clay has not eroded away at the top of the hill –this is the only evidence to suggest it may have been imported, however it is very homogeneous (suggesting natural deposition) and there is no clear function or reason to import such a large amount of clay to the top of the hill. The earthworks in this trench indicate that the spoil heap is earlier than the boundary bank, although neither can be ascribed an absolute date. The bank appears to be Post Medieval as it is well preserved and extremely uniform and straight across the landscape.



## Sources consulted

British Geological Survey (BGS) (2022), <http://mapapps.bgs.ac.uk/geologyofbritain/home.html> accessed 17/10/2022

Fearn Heritage and Archaeology (2019). *Historic Landscape Survey of Clee Liberty Common*. Unpublished client report.