

SOME WELSH EVIDENCE

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I must beg your indulgence for departing from the strict terms of reference for this forum, but my reasons for doing so should be obvious as I proceed. A number of the buildings I will mention have no or but tenuous links, with monastic settlements, but are, I believe germane to a discussion of the architectural character of early Welsh ecclesiastical buildings. I propose that my remarks shall be limited strictly to descriptions and interpretations of remains of actual buildings, or to the archaeological evidence of their existence. I will not deal with the history of a monastic settlement and the uncertain journeys of the Celtic Saints. The architecture and archaeology of most of the individual countries or areas to be discussed at this meeting have certain idiosyncratic features or peculiarities. The reasons for these are at times obvious, whilst others could be debated indefinitely. Having worked with genuine affection in Wales for over 25 years, I believe it is fair to say that in the most general terms its architectural heritage is very poor. Its Early Christian archaeology is not leavened by souterrains, round towers, or vaulted oratories, and it is even possible that England may be able to produce more Celtic bells. However, Wales possesses a very remarkable collection of inscribed stones, which give a very clear indication of the Christian settlement (1).

A great deal of emphasis has rightly been placed on the importance of the western sea approaches, but at many periods Wales has been very greatly influenced by England, and this border, often ill-defined, is twice the length of Hadrian's Wall. The Severn estuary on the south and its course further north, together with the northern coastal plain have been easy passages by which Roman, Norman and Edwardian conquests have been realised. In North Wales the influx of fine craftsmen in the late 13th century to build the Edwardian Castles has made a lasting impression visible in the superior quality of building in that area (2). When there has been a conscious marked political boundary such as Offa's Dyke, thrown up in the late 8th century, it seems to have been somewhat a cultural barrier. This is borne out by the map (Fig. 1) which shows the distribution of Anglo-Saxon churches; it calls for no comment. There is in fact no pre-Norman conquest church standing above ground in Wales, and naturally one searches for an explanation of this architectural poverty.

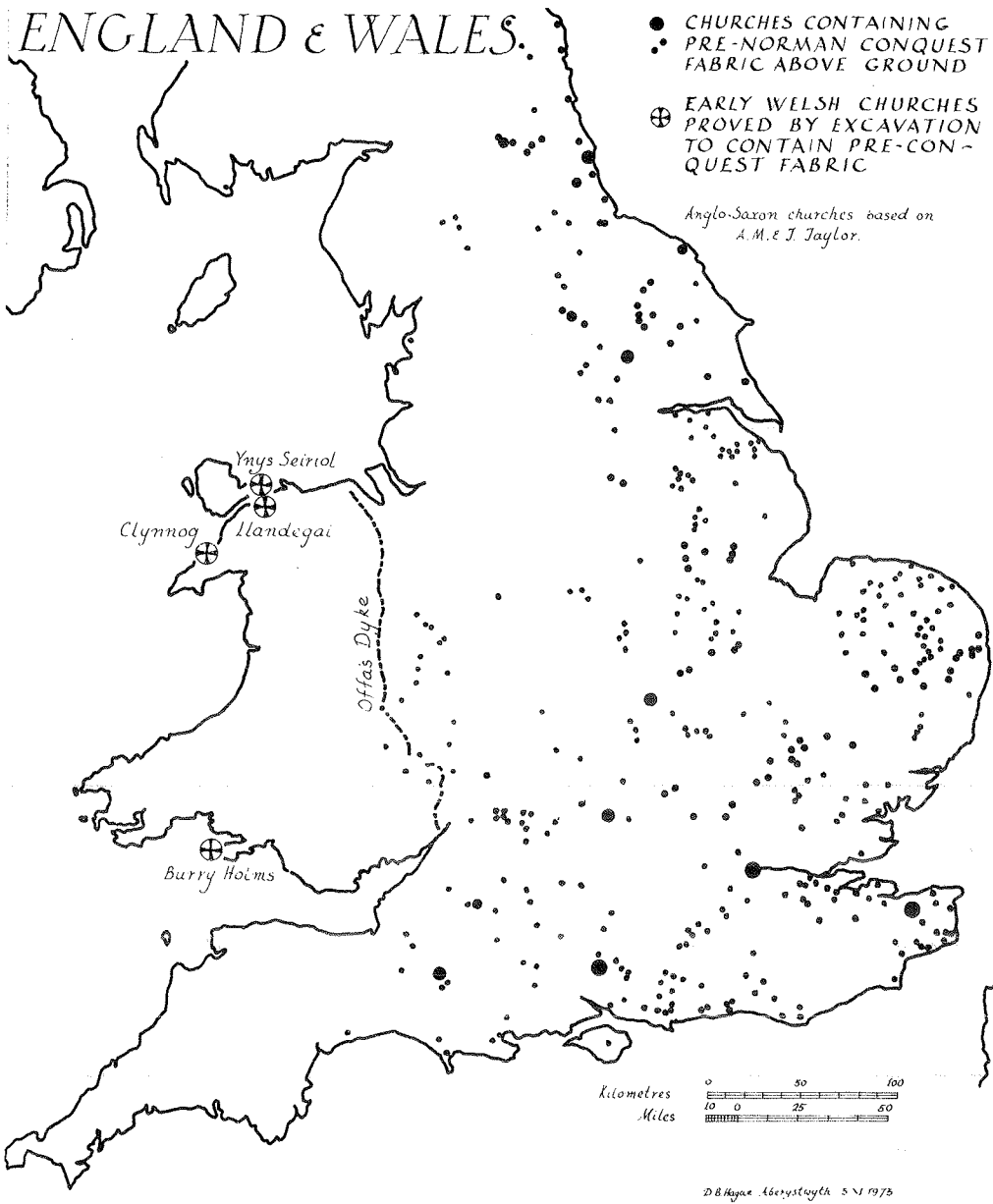


Figure 1.

Geologically, a large part of the Principality is composed of hard igneous rocks, or poor quality shales and slates, neither conducive to finely worked or datable detail. The movement of good stone in the mountainous area was prohibitive to all but the most wealthy builders, whilst the beds of limestone and grit in south Wales are clearly responsible for the better quality domestic and ecclesiastical buildings found in Glamorgan and Monmouthshire. Wales generally was well wooded, mostly oak of small but adequate size. The natural consequence of this is that a great deal of early building has disappeared, and can only be recovered by archaeological excavation. Particularly in the case of modest primitive structures erected by one or two comparatively unskilled individuals, the use of wood enabled a roof and shelter to be provided more quickly than by the use of any other material. In the north, where stone was freely available and had been used with skill by Iron Age builders it is strange that the early Christians made so little use of it.

That Christian worship was carried out in the late Roman villas is not in question, but no convincing plan of a purpose-built church of the Roman period has been found. Neither has any of the known major centres of Celtic monasticism such as Bangor, Llandeilo or Llantwit Major left any surface remains, largely because of later occupation. Many of these mother or clas churches survive in the form of 12th or 13th century buildings, usually with long nave and transepts with a crossing tower. Typical examples are Llanbadarn Fawr (3) and Llanddewi Brefi, both in Cardiganshire. Both these sites have inherited ancient inscribed stones, but none hints at the form of their predecessors.

Several examples are known of the holy men settling themselves within the walls of old Roman forts. Caer Gybi at Holyhead, a small coastal fort contains the parish church and a late medieval building known as Eglwys y Bedd may cover the resting place of St Cybi himself (4). The site was granted to Cybi by Maelgwn Gwynedd, Prince of North Wales. Caerhun, the Roman Kanovium is another example of the use of a larger Roman fort (5). We are no more fortunate in seeking an early church at any of the score of places in Wales bearing the prefix Merthyr (Martyrion) although Merthyr Mawr, or more correctly, Merthyr Myfor contains a wealth of early stones.

Some Excavated Sites. Not many early church sites have been excavated in Wales, and very few have yielded real evidence of an early church, but some, especially on the islands where post-Reformation work is rare,

Early Periods

⊕ Revealed by excavation

⊗ Known historically with associated early stones etc.

○ Known historically. Clas sites

Medieval

□ Benedictine

□ Cistercian

◇ Canons Regular

△ Friars

○ Nuns etc.

⬡ Colleges etc.

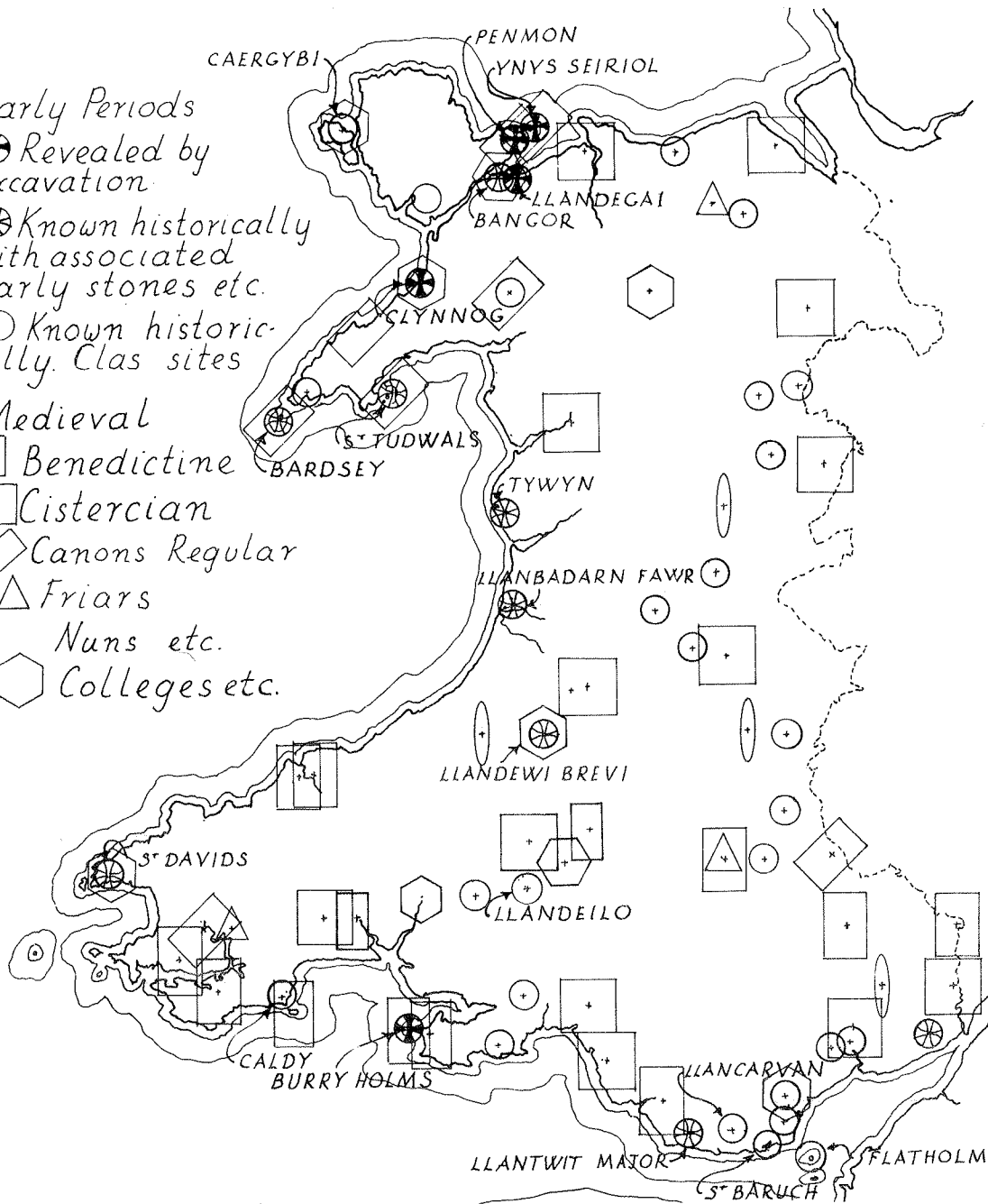


Figure 2. Celtic and Medieval Ecclesiastical Establishments in Wales.

have produced plans of conventual buildings (Fig. 3). One of the most interesting recently came to light during the excavation of the Llandegai henge monument near Bangor by my colleague Christopher Houlder (6). This site, suspected from a medieval reference to the present church having been built 'Two bow-shots from the old' was discovered from the air by Dr St Joseph. During the course of rescue excavations on a lavish scale, a Christian cemetery was encountered near the cursus on the edge of the excavating area. Amidst the burials was a small rectangle 14 ft by 11 ft manifest in the form of a narrow trench about 1 ft 6 in deep with a large central burial. The nature of the soil had eliminated all human remains from all the burials, but it seems more likely that the rather larger and clearly disturbed central grave had had its contents translated to another church (Fig. 3 A). This, the present parish church of Llandegai has no features which can be placed earlier than the 15th century, and in view of the diminutive size of this oratory or martyrion of St Tegai which could never have served as a parish church in the Norman period, one might have expected to find a romanesque replacement. However, none was found nor detected from the aerial photographs. I was able to examine very closely the three remaining baulks crossing the trenches and from the disposition of the packing stones within the fillings and the horizontal sections, I believe the building was constructed of vertical posts in the manner of a platelayer's hut. It is true there was no proof of it having been roofed, but personally I consider it almost perverse to suggest otherwise, and it seems almost certain that this modest building was erected at the time of the death of the saint of the 5th or 6th century.

A similar type of chapel, this time of stone came to light in 1913 during the excavations within the mortuary chapel or Capel y Bedd at Clynnog in Caernarvonshire (Fig. 3 B) (7). Clynnog, one of the clas churches is unusually large and was wealthy for this area, being the centre of the cult of St Beuno and a place of pilgrimage in its own right, and it was also set on a pilgrim route to Bardsey. The present fine building of the late 15th century replaced an earlier one, but to the south-west set on a different alignment and attached to it by a roofed corridor is the early 16th century Chapel of the Grave. It would seem unlikely that when this was built some of the earlier chapel may well have been standing above ground. Unfortunately little can be said about these ancient remains other than they formed a rectangle 18 ft by 9 ft.

A similarly aligned and related chapel on an attractive but smaller scale is at Llanelilian in Anglesey, although here the attached chapel itself is

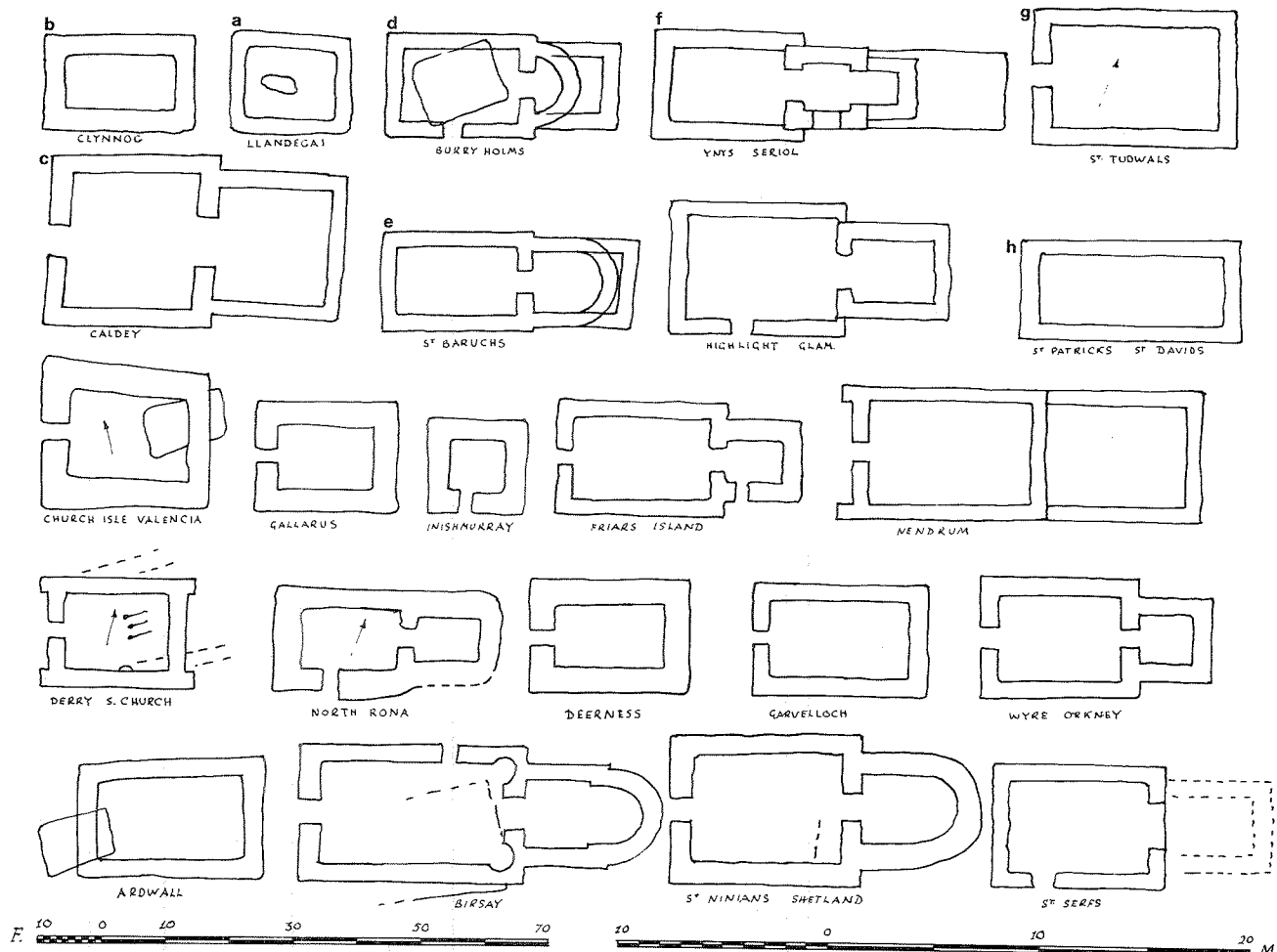


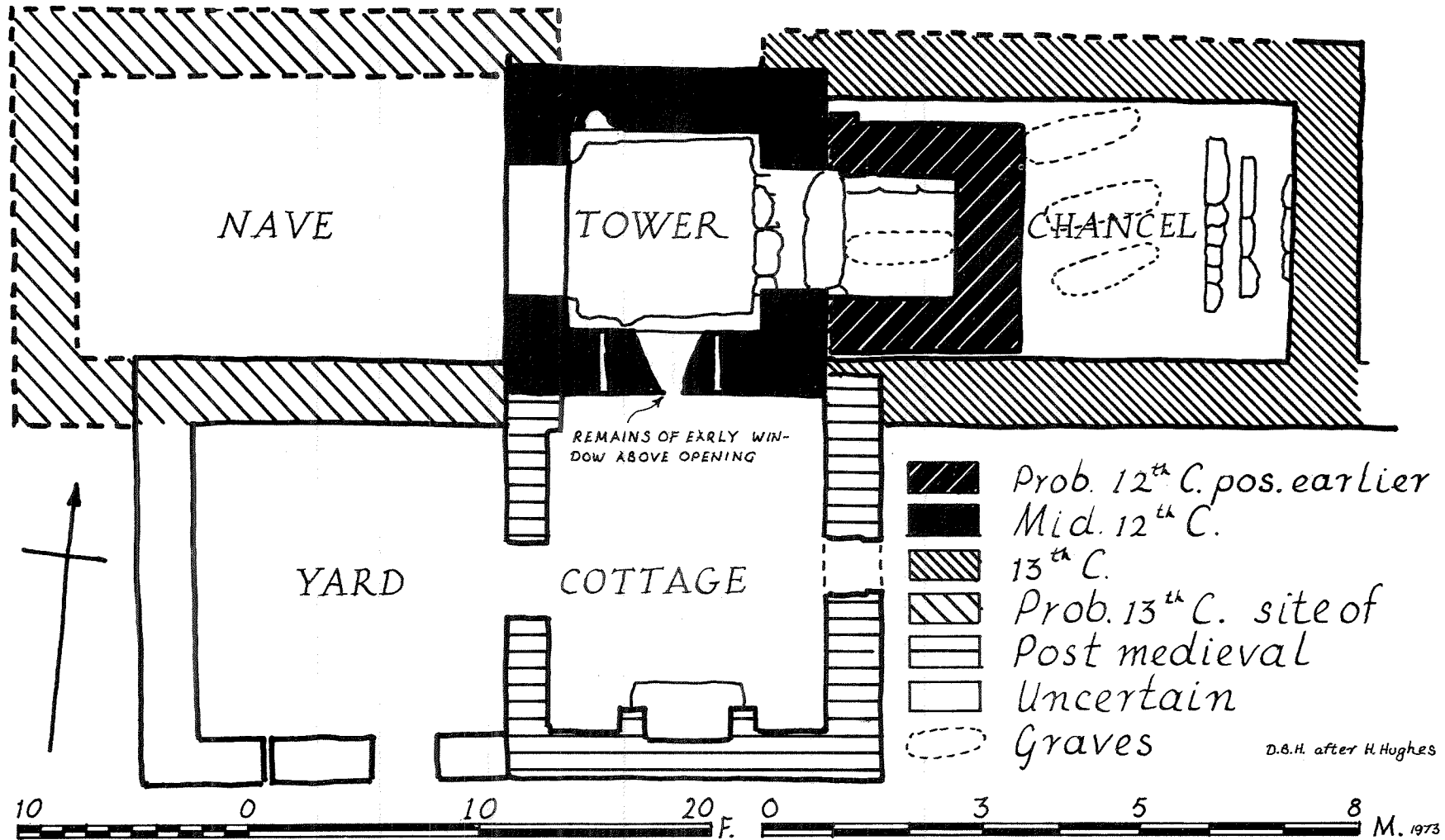
Figure 3.

too small to have encompassed an early one (8). The chapel already mentioned at Caer Gybi is entirely separate. Also in Anglesey very recent discoveries at Bodedern revealed a forgotten Christian cemetery set within an earlier enclosure. Near its centre on the edge of the excavated area some post holes suggested the existence of a wooden chapel. This site should clearly be compared with that at Llandegai. The rescue excavations were precipitated by the chance discovery of a late 5th century inscribed stone (9).

Bardsey is an island of great charm lying off the western tip of the Lleyn peninsula. It was the reputed burial place of many saints, including Dyfrig and Deiniol. The monks here were still described as Culdees in 1188, but soon after the community had adopted the rule of Augustinian Canons. Alas, of these early periods there are no remains except two early stones, one of the 8th the other of the 10th century. Architecturally all that survives is a 13th century tower 19 ft square externally, standing to a height of about 16 ft with walls of 3 ft 6 in and a good 13th century lancet in its east wall. The relation of this to the church is obscured by densely packed modern graves, but discreet probes revealed walls running off in southerly and westerly directions (10).

The plan shows three rather enigmatic lumps of massive masonry of the same period, these are lying as fallen, and it would seem that they must have formed part of a large building, presumably that described by Pennant in 1773. Unfortunately owing to an energetic, and in its own way interesting development in mid-19th century farming layout, much of the land around the cemetery was levelled below that of the tower floor, and none of the adjacent complex of agricultural buildings in any way evokes the monastic layout. Aerial photographs are equally unrewarding, and it would seem Bardsey's secrets will remain until revealed by future building operations. The most likely area for remains to be found may be in the flat land to the east, before the ground rises to the barrier of Bardsey Mountain.

Another important and more rewarding site in North Wales is that of Puffin Island or Ynys Seiriol lying off the south-east tip of Anglesey. It is a small limestone island about three-quarters of a mile long, which was excavated in 1896 by Harold Hughes (Fig. 4) (11). The settlement here is connected with a larger and probably parent monastery at Penmon on the mainland of Anglesey, where there is no reason to doubt the tradition that the small circular hut near the Holy Well is the cell of Seiriol, and it is possible that the small island was his retreat (12). The island community is first



D.B.H. after H. Hughes

Figure 4. Ynys Seiriol (Anglesey).

mentioned by Giraldus in 1188, but by 1221 there were Augustinian Canons in residence. The most conspicuous feature of Ynys Seiriol is the very striking little 12th century tower with its stone pyramidal roof. The other remains of the church and ancillary buildings are marked by low ruined walls, except for the remains of a late cottage built against the south face of the tower. Internally the tower measures 8 ft 5 in square and round-headed openings led into the chancel and nave. The belfry stage is lit by four windows, single lights on the north and east, with double ones on the west and south with slightly tapering jambs of Irish type. The arched heads were cut from single stones, but the central baluster shafts have gone. When excavations took place east of the tower the plan of the 13th-century chancel was recovered. The late chancel measuring 20 ft by 11 ft encloses the original tiny chancel, only 5 ft square; both these left a scar or creasing on the east face of the tower. The smaller one left a very clear impression of a round barrel vault; this earlier chancel poses several problems. The evidence on the tower face suggests that the tower was built against an existing building, but a free-standing tall thin-walled barrel-vaulted building 5 ft square is unacceptable. There was no evidence to suggest that this had been truncated from a longer building of more reasonable proportions. Such a cross section could only survive if about 5 ft long where it would depend for support upon its own gable and from the abutment of the tower. Therefore despite its lack of structural bond these two elements are likely to be coeval. The single creasing on the west face of the tower shows that there has been no other nave than that traced by the foundations measuring 18 ft by 12 ft. It is doubtful whether further excavation could help much at this point, but it might be possible to present a case that the tower like that at Penmon was in fact an insertion, into or on an earlier church.

The church stands near the centre of an oblong enclosure measuring about 100 ft by 50 ft. In 1936, the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments were able to produce a plan, but the site is now very heavily overgrown. On the north-west straight side of this enclosure there is a group of near square chambers of at least two periods but without datable features, which are clearly the living quarters. There is no sign whatever of a communal hall such as that found on St Tudwal's and Burryholm, and suggested at St Serfs, Kinross. The enclosure extends to the north-east where it incorporates the group of irregular-shaped huts of more archaic form; to the south-west there are three paddocks or enclosures.

On the south side of Lleyn forming the sheltered St Tudwal's Roads lie the two small islands named after the saint. Tudwal's ancient association with

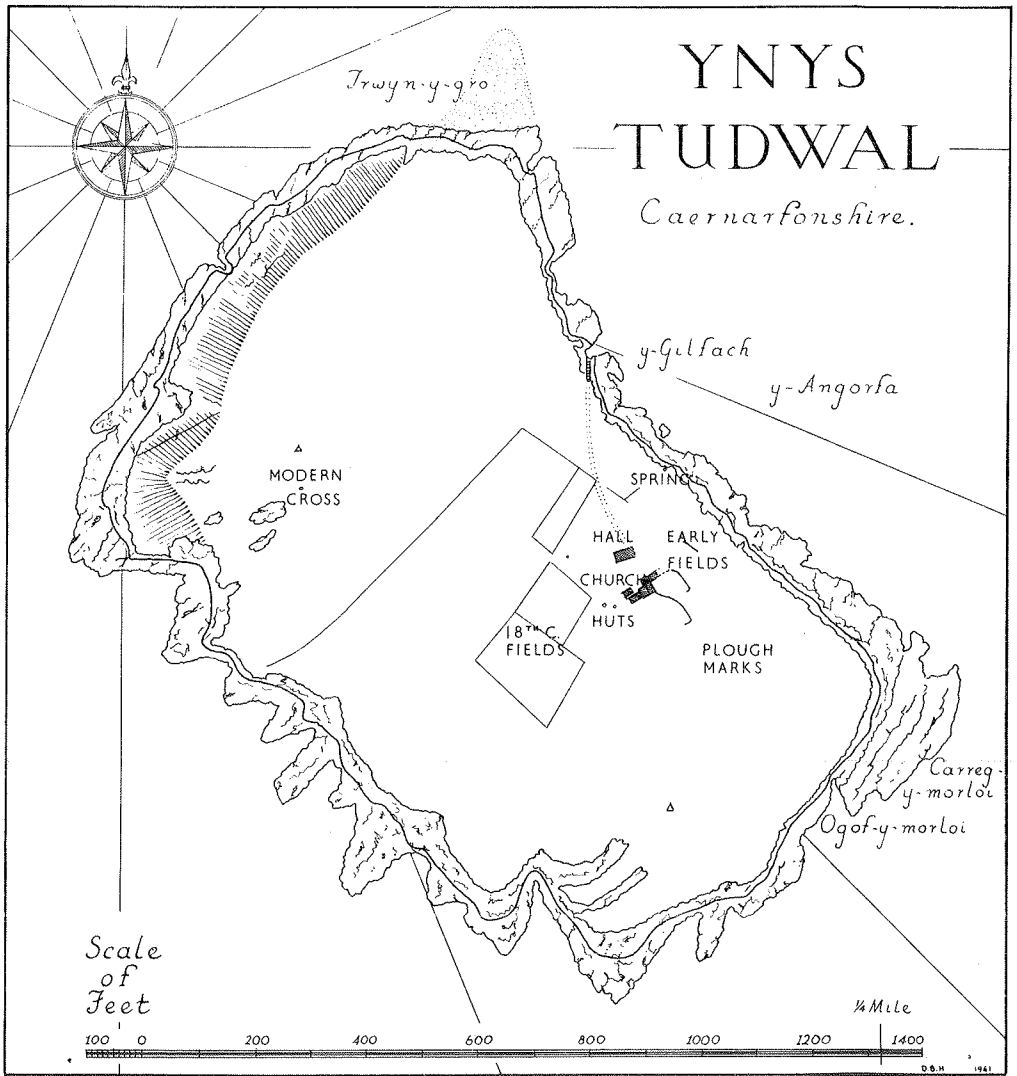


Figure 5. Ynys Tudwal (Caernarvonshire).

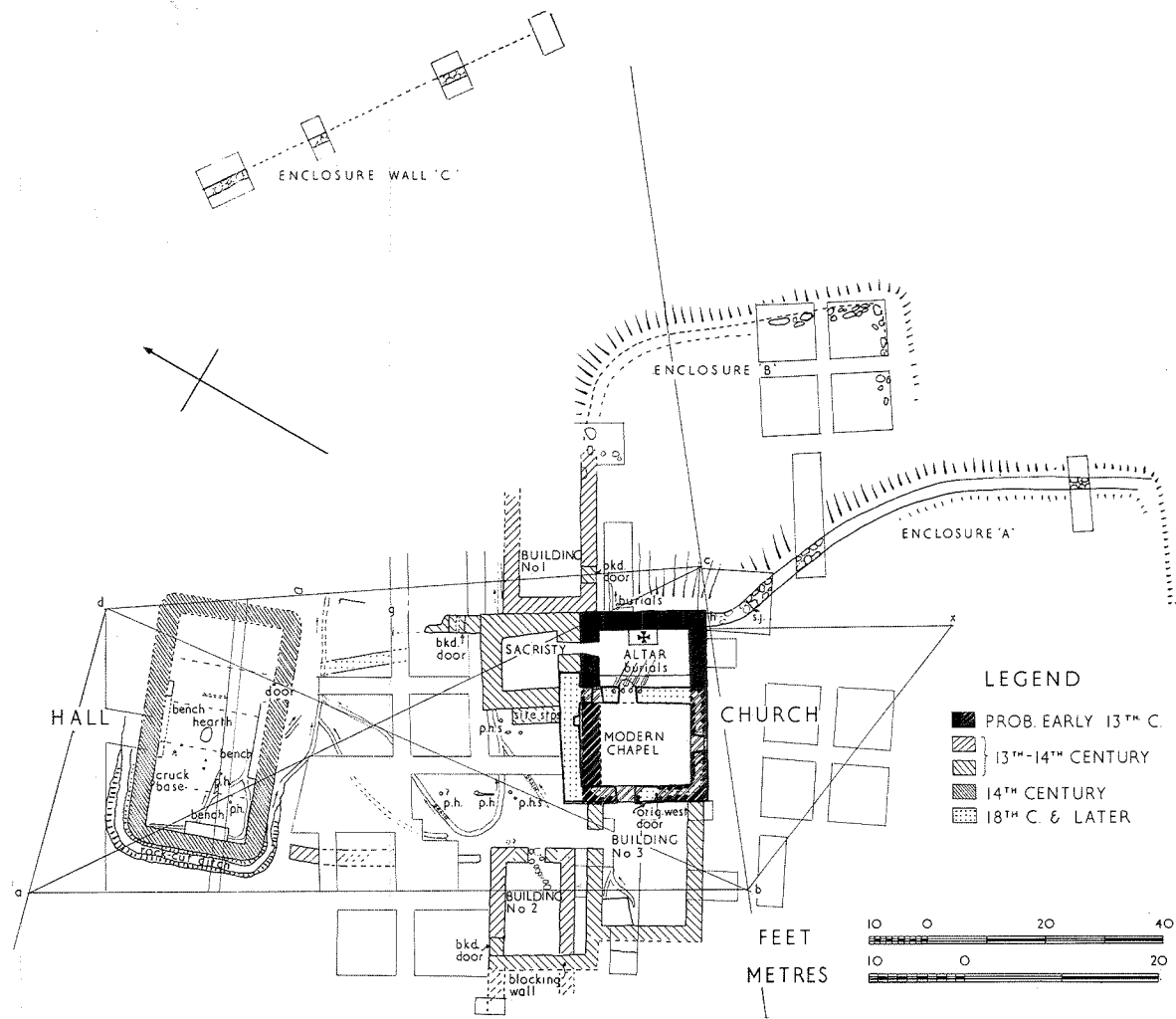


Figure 6. Ecclesiastical Settlement on St Tudwal's East Island (Caernarvonshire); Excavated areas 1959-61.

the area is confirmed by the nearby parish name Tudweiliog. His name also appears in Llanstudwal in Milford Haven, and in the Channel Islands and also as bishop of Treguier in Brittany (Fig. 5).

Nothing whatever was known of the settlement on St Tudwal's east island except the existence of a small roofed building of late date, and a sort of yard to the west, presumably associated with a gallant but naive attempt of Father Hughes to convert the Welsh to the old faith in the late 1880's. I undertook a somewhat limited excavation here over three short seasons, with no certainty of a 'next year' and minimal funds (13) (Fig. 6); it was only possible because of the kindness of the Outward Bound Sea School at Aberdovey who shipped us out free of charge. Although we were unable to produce the plan of a pre-conquest church we were able to recover the plan of an establishment far more ambitious than we had expected; most of it dated from its tenure by a community of Augustinian Canons as on Bardsey. The church consisted of a single chamber of 13th-century work. Unfortunately a full examination of the entire interior was limited by the very reasonable condition made by the owner that we did not endanger the stability of the roofed building. The first difficulty was that this had a thick concrete floor, the second that two of its walls stood on fallen rubble and to underpin and support them limited the examination to a narrow strip against the east wall of the church. Excavation soon revealed that the late building had been erected across the west end of the medieval church. Against the north-east corner was a roughly square chamber entered from a door in the church. As this had thick walls and also a double one against the church it was interpreted as an intended tower, perhaps with a ground floor serving as a sacristy, and the upper stage reached by a stair on the block of masonry on its west side. The remains of a structure against the east side of the tower was incomplete owing to its collapse down the slope to the sea, a fate which had affected other buildings. The very obliquely aligned burials found within the church led us to seek evidence of a differently aligned earlier church, but alas this was not forthcoming in the area available for examination. The plan shows the layout of buildings around the church (Fig. 7). Next in date to the church the oldest building appeared to be that at the north-west. This was modified and truncated with the addition of the building immediately west of the church, but unfortunately neither of its occupation levels produced any datable finds. Clearly these must be dwellings and antedate the hall set about 50 ft to the north. This hall is a very unusual building without parallel in north Wales, but is almost exactly repeated by Burryholm and at Penmaen Castle in Gower (14). It was excavated into the rock, almost half of its floor being bedrock. Round

the west end the very neatly cut deep drainage ditch embraced its rounded corners and resulted in this wall being cut from the solid rock standing about 3 ft high. A few laid stones indicated that its eaves must have been a little higher and its rounded corners and the lack of slates indicated a hipped roof covered with thatch. Another unusual feature, the consequence of its construction, was a rock-cut housing shaped to take the end tenon of a cruck truss. It was possible to recover the width of the bays, although the very marked slip towards the sea had removed the end of the hall but its position was recovered by excavation. It was furnished with side benches and with a wider one at the west end, this was apparently set off-centre with a rack or structure by the hearth which was clearly represented by post holes. One of these holes contained the neck of a small French jar of the early 14th century. Other features included post holes and a curious slot cut in the rock which might have related to the structures beneath the modern buildings. Finds were not numerous, the few Roman fragments included a nicely worked mixing palette. The situation of the island may have caused it to be selected as a Roman signal station, as lead was mined by the Romans on the mainland on more than one site near by and this had to be shipped to Chester around the Lleyn Peninsula, and the roads would have been used as a safe anchorage in bad weather.

Before dealing in more detail with excavations in Glamorgan, mention might be made of examination of burials disturbed by holiday-makers at St Patrick's Chapel, St David's which produced a rude pre-conquest scratched cross memorial suggesting that a medieval chapel uncovered in 1920 is probably built over an earlier building (Fig. 3 H) (15). Nearby on Ramsey Island an unusual inscription was found recently; it seems to me that the site marked as a chapel is clearly that of a water-mill, and that the ancient site must be under the present farmhouse which is suitably orientated (16). The island of Caldey contains a well preserved small Benedictine Priory of early 13th century date incorporating an earlier defensive tower. The island also has another church of unusual form with a very wide near square nave, this is almost certainly 12th century in date (Fig. 3 C) (17). There is also an early stone with an ogam inscription.

I was fortunate in persuading my Commissioners to allow me to investigate the ecclesiastical settlement on Burryholm, as an official Royal Commission excavation. This relieved me of many problems and we were able to undertake five season's work. Burryholm is a small tidal islet of about 15 acres lying off the north-west tip of Gower, formed of carboniferous limestone and rising to a ridge of about 100 ft on the west, with the medieval settlement

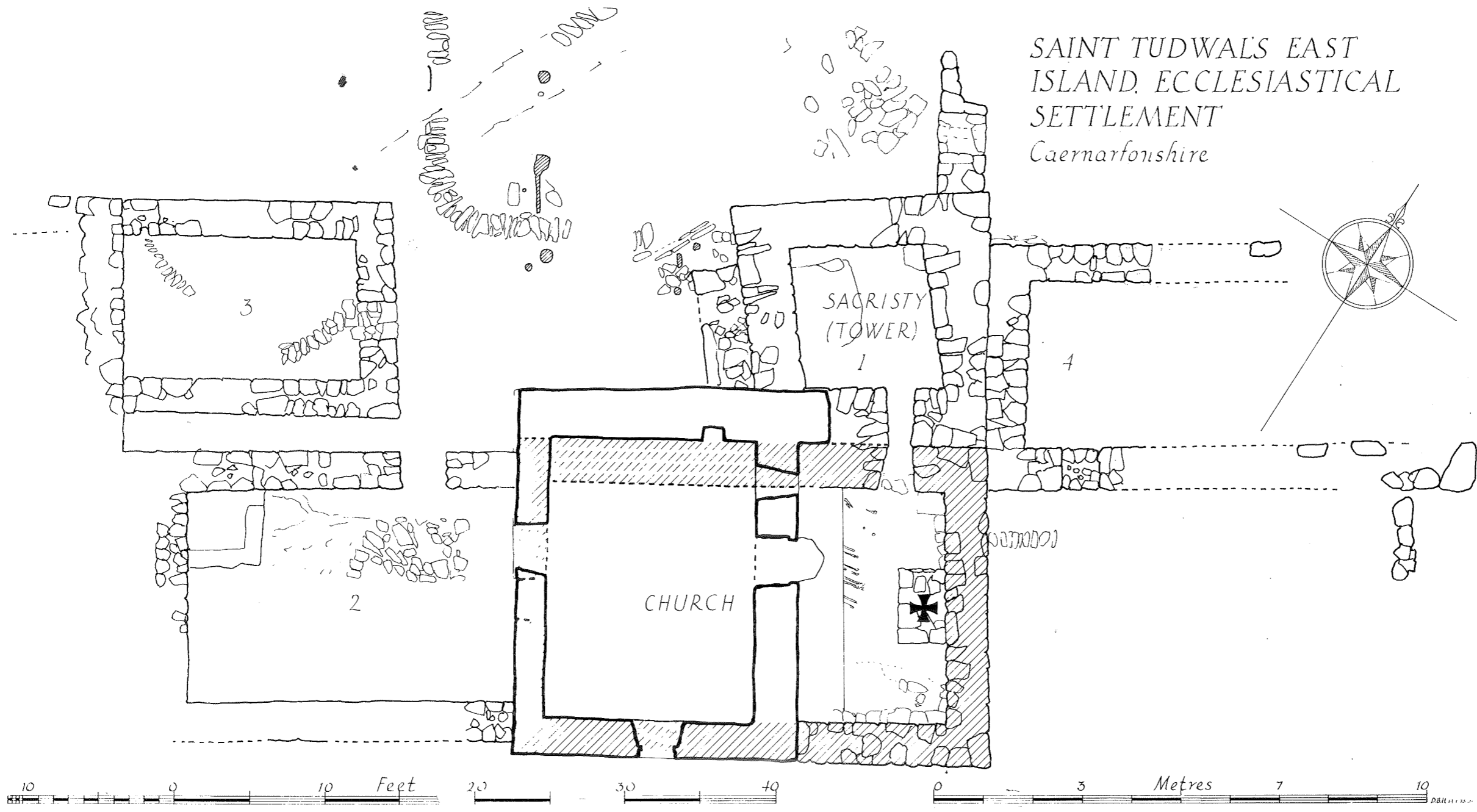
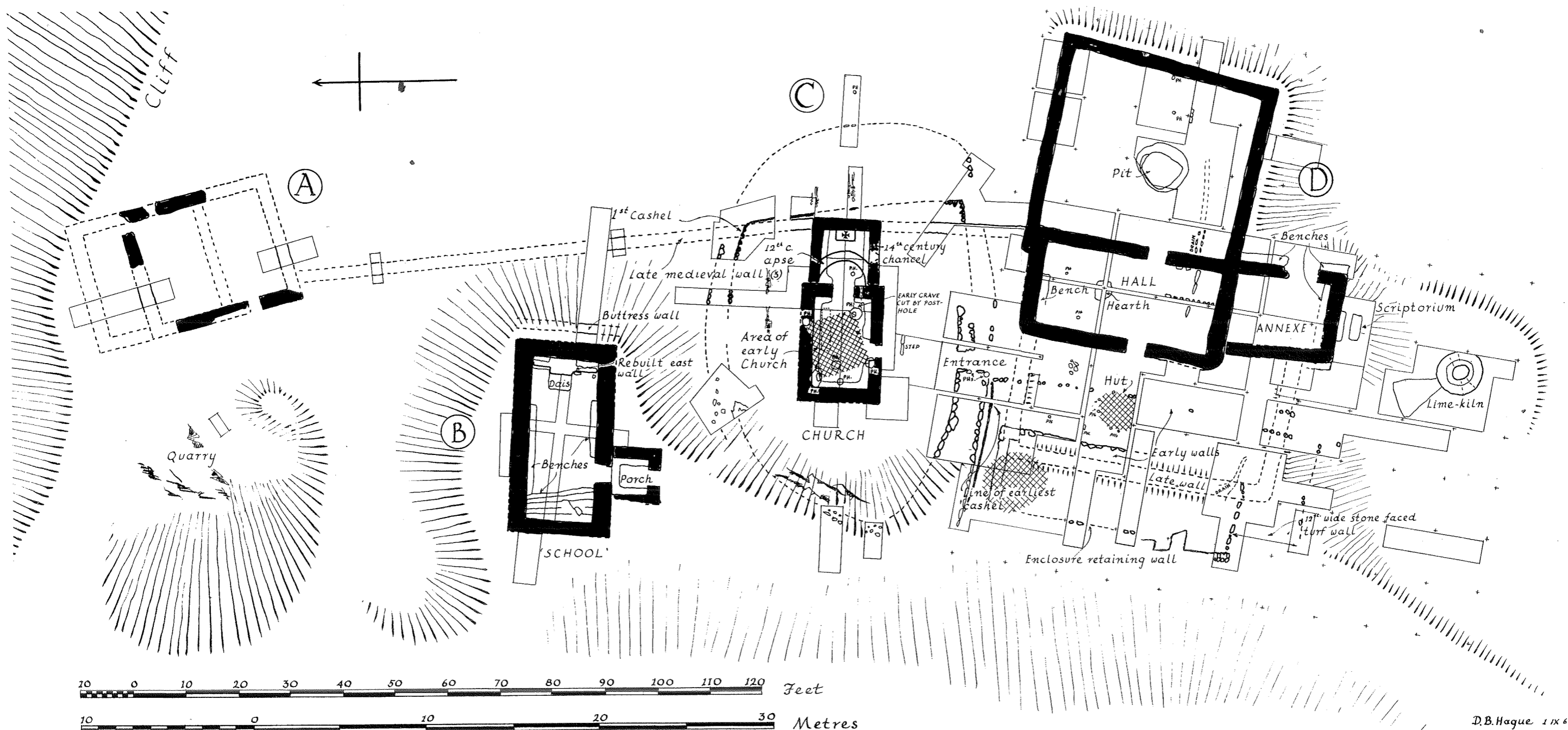


Figure 7. St Tudwal's East Island; Plan of Church and Adjacent Buildings.



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Figure 8. Ecclesiastical Settlement Burryholm (Glamorganshire);
Excavated areas 1965-9.

set on the lower sheltered ground opposite the mainland. A small promontory hill-fort on the ridge was given sufficient attention to enable some objective comment to be made about the character of its defences. The main purpose of the excavation was to recover the plan and history of the religious settlement, the area of which fell into four separate sites lettered A to D on the plan (Fig. 8). A, the northernmost building had walls standing up to 8 ft high which were obviously late in character and proved to be so by excavation. At B, traces of mortared masonry were visible before excavation, after which it was found to be a building 31 ft by 12 ft built into the hill with its east gable standing on a platform of made ground. Settlement of this caused later modification including the buttressing of the outside, and its eventual rebuilding further west. The general conclusion was that this 14th-15th century building with its south porch and tiers of stone seating at the west was a school or meeting-room, there being nothing to suggest its ever having been a church.

C, the church and its enclosures were the subject of excavation every year (Fig. 9). In its last phase the early 12th-century nave 17 ft by 11 ft had a later added chancel 10 ft by 9 ft built over a tiny apse of about 4 ft 6 in in radius, with a very narrow chancel arch which was retained in the later periods. The apse is an uncommon feature in Welsh church architecture, there having been examples at Bangor Cathedral (18), Llanfairpwllgwyngyll in Anglesey (19), Pennant Melangell (20), St Baruch's (21) and Sully (22) (Fig. 3). Beneath the nave were the four corner post-holes of a timber church on a slightly different alignment; this had clearly been standing when the stone church was built, as the holes were filled with stones including some chippings from the characteristic soft dressings of the chancel arch. It cannot be certain when the wooden church or oratory was built, but it is most likely to have been the work of Caradog who died in 1124, and was known to have been at Llangennith before 1089. As its south-east post hole was cut into an earlier disturbed burial, an earlier period of Christian occupation was indicated, giving strength to the tradition that the site was plundered by the Vikings and then abandoned. This sequence of events was confirmed by the examination of the cashel or enclosure wall at several points. On the south-west where it ran into the hill the earliest wall was of very small stones revetting the outer face of the turf wall. After abandonment for a period there was fragmentary evidence to indicate that a palisade had been erected on the top of the eroded bank; as one of the post holes contained a chip of the soft dressed stone used in the 12th-century dressings, it probably antedates it by only a short period. The curved course of the earliest enclosure continued to about the east wall

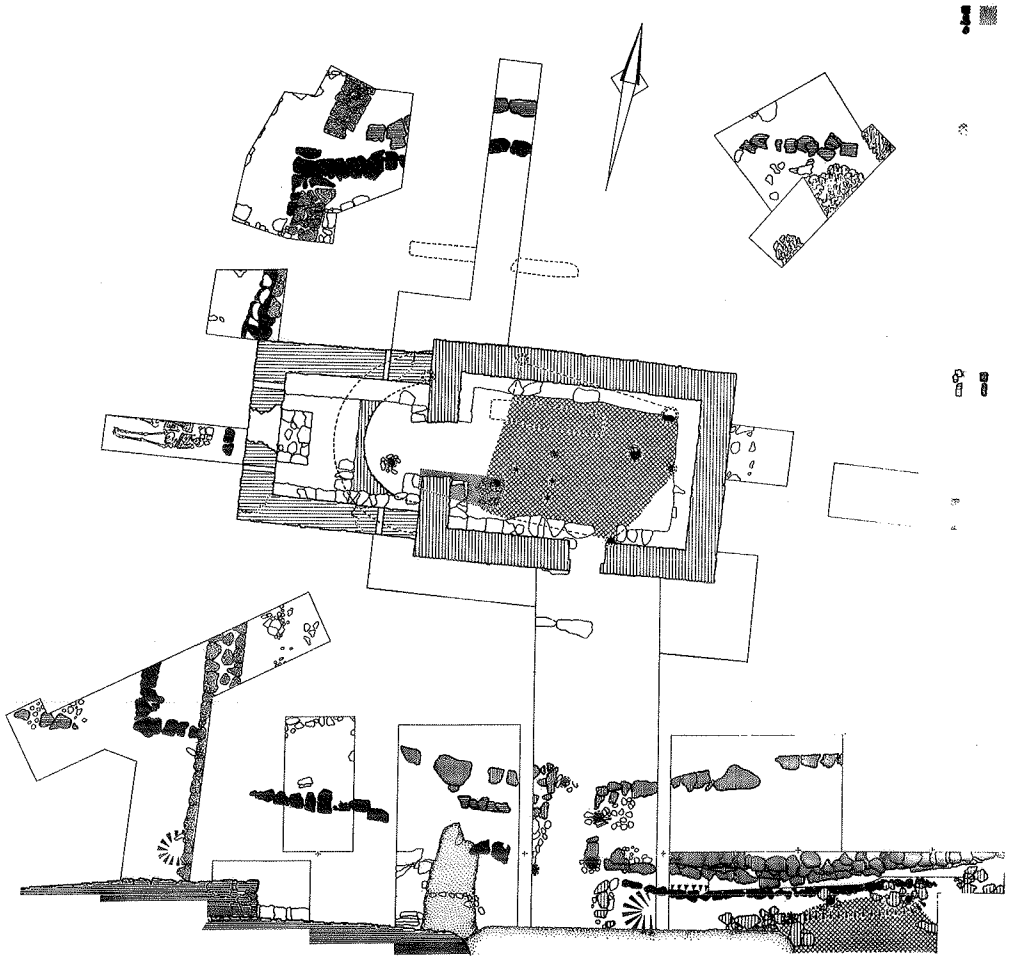


Figure 9. Burryholm; Site C, Church and Enclosure.

of the church where carinations marked an almost straight chord; the line of this was chosen as a foundation by the builders of the square-ended chancel. A rather crude 12th-century enclosure followed an egg-shaped plan and consisted of a double line of orthostats; a little later when its entrance was narrowed the wall to the east was decreased in thickness. Finally a straight wall connecting the corner of the chancel to the hall was built; the wall continued northwards where it eventually joined up with the later site A.

D, the domestic quarters, proved to be complicated and also of considerable interest (Fig. 10). The last stage consisted of the hall 33 ft by 15 ft with rounded external corners like those at St Tudwal's, Penmaen and Pennard. The carefully levelled area of earlier occupation to the east, measuring about 34 ft by 36 ft was enclosed by a well-built wall; this clearly contained lean-to buildings which did not take too kindly to excavation. There was a small annexe south of the hall, and beyond this a table and a bench, which despite its exposed situation, is likely to have been scriptorium like the similar structures at Tintagel. Beyond this was an attractive lime kiln, used originally for building, then reduced in size for whitewashing; there was ample evidence of the use of this in the church. The 12th century living quarters and the earlier ones lay to the west where there was more protection, but the fact that they were extensively robbed and later gardened, and finally covered by a wall, made it impossible to recover the full story. In brief, there was an earlier hall or building about 44 ft by 14 ft built along the slope with some traces of cross-wall near its south end, and a badly robbed wall running parallel to the east, probably bounded a yard or terrace. These features overlay two wooden huts, the smaller one to the east was blessed with a collection of slingstones, the larger one was at a higher level than the earliest cashel enclosure, and was probably associated with the palisade already mentioned. The site produced an abundant collection of medieval pottery, some of it of considerable interest. It also produced some coins several being stratified and a number of Roman sherds. Nobody appears to accept our most primitive cooking-pot as Iron Age, but the general conclusion was that the remains of an earlier presumably Iron Age settlement had been levelled by the first Christians to occupy the site.

Developments in and around important monastic sites are rarely undertaken and when these do take place the odds are against the revelation of any coherent plan of early settlement; but minor sites of potential interest such as that at Bodedern are bound to turn up. If these are reported, examined and excavated where possible they will yield isolated scraps of detail which

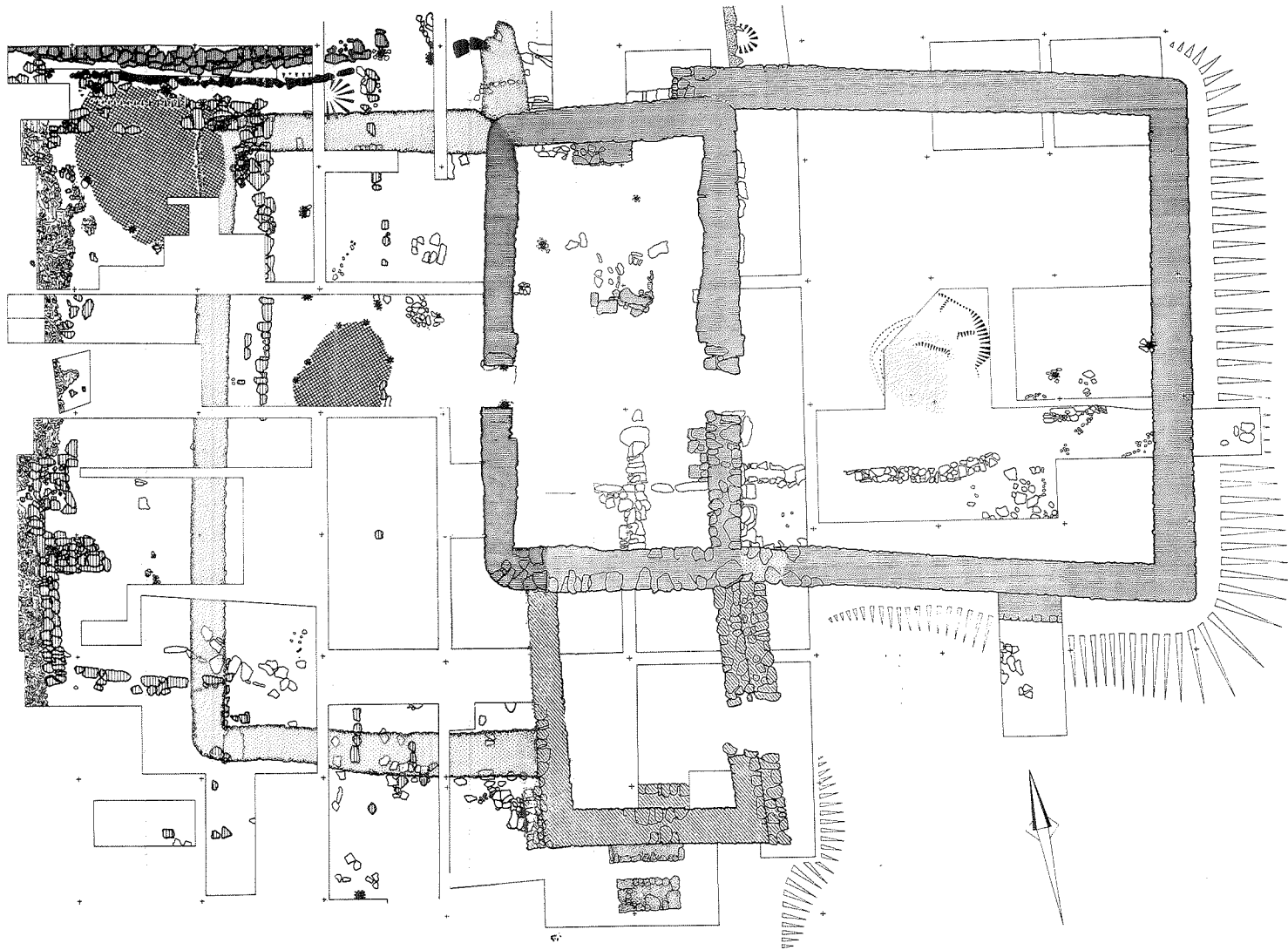


Figure 10. Burryholm; Site D, Domestic Quarters.

will eventually lead to the recovery of the full pattern, or patterns of early Christian worship. The new owner of Bardsey is sympathetic to archaeological studies and I hope to keep in touch with the modest building operations planned for the island. I also hope that in the near future I will be able to excavate the tidal island of Gateholm, Pembrokeshire, although here the ground survey suggests that this site is not an ecclesiastical settlement.

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