

ARFORDIR COASTAL HERITAGE 2011 – 2012 (EXTRACT) WHITESANDS BAY, BRONZE AGE CIST EXCAVATION



Prepared by Dyfed Archaeological Trust

For Cadw



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**RHIF YR ADRODDIAD / REPORT NO. 2012/24
RHIF Y DIGWYDDIAD/ PROJECT RECORD NO. 102763**

**WHITESANDS BAY CIST
RHIF Y DIGWYDDIAD/ EVENT RECORD NO. 102765**

Mawrth 2012
March 2012

**ARFORDIR - COASTAL HERITAGE
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EXCAVATION**

Gan / By

James Meek, Hubert Wilson

Paratowyd yr adroddiad yma at ddefnydd y cwsmer yn unig. Ni dderbynnir cyfrifoldeb gan Archaeoleg Cambria am ei ddefnyddio gan unrhyw berson na phersonau eraill a fydd yn ei ddarllen neu ddibynnu ar y gwybodaeth y mae'n ei gynnwys

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**Whitesands Bay, St David's, Pembrokeshire
(SM 7316 2734; PRN 102766)**

In late autumn 2011 Martin Bell was visiting the Ram's Nose, the small rocky promontory projecting into Whitesands Bay near St David's. He noted the edge of a feature which had the appearance of a small stone cist (Figures 1 & 2). Dyfed Archaeological Trust were informed and in December a site visit was carried out with a volunteer to find the site and assess whether it was under threat from erosion and worthy of further investigation. This was a newly identified site. A number of flint objects have been previously recorded on the Ram's Nose, including one oval scraper attributed to the Neolithic (PRN 11371) and a number of finds recovered by a local resident (only one of which was seen, and none have been recorded on the HER).

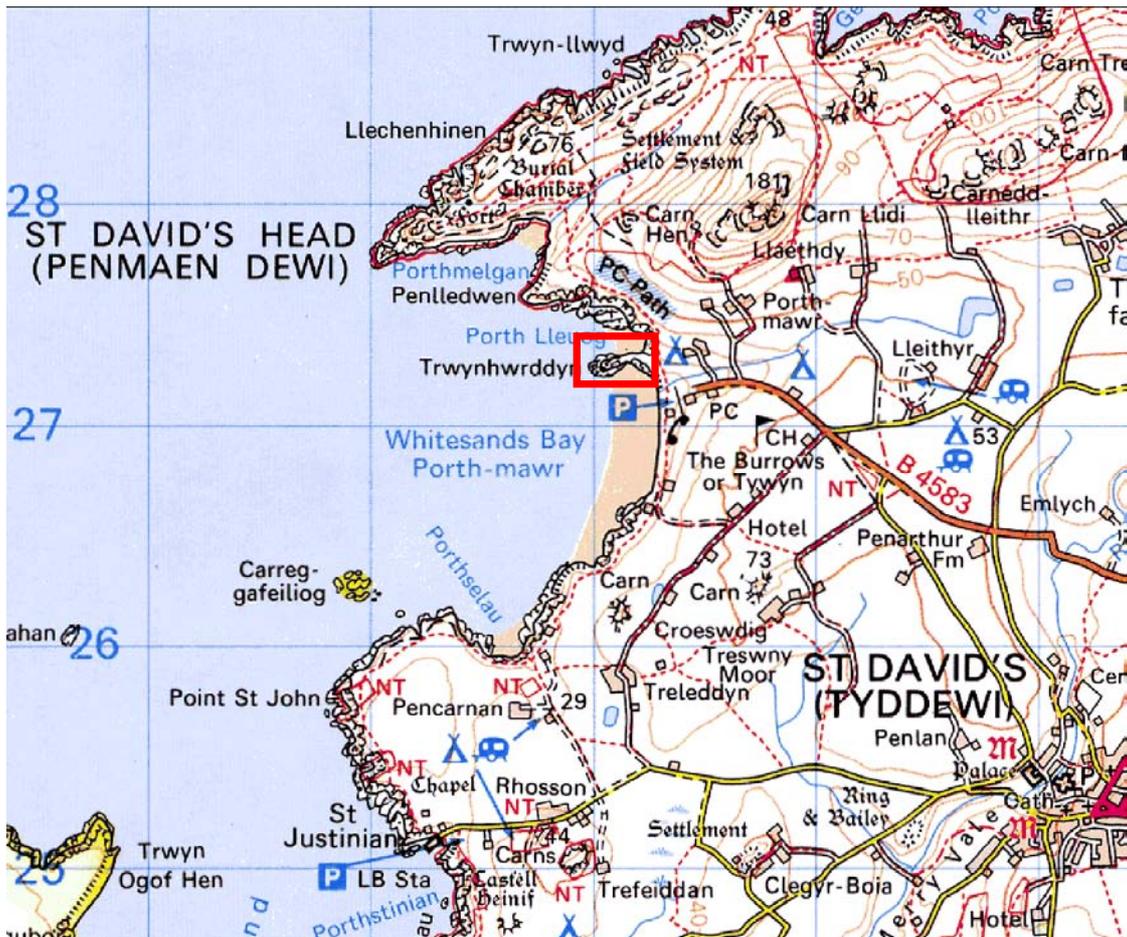


Figure 1: Location map, based on the Ordnance Survey.

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Photo 9: Eroding cist grave in December 2011

The cist comprised a low mound of turf which had suffered from erosion to the north and northwest (Photo 9). This erosion had been caused by a mix of rainwater run-off and foot-fall, the Ram's Nose being a popular viewpoint and fishing spot. The eroded edge revealed an apparent large rounded capstone and underlying horizontal, angular shale slab. The ends of two upright shale slabs could be seen on its northern edge, with medium sized rounded pebbles in between and to the side. In plan-view an apparent kerb of large rounded pebbles surrounded the cist. One of these larger pebbles was found slipped down the adjacent cliff edge.

The potential significance of the site and its evident ongoing erosion was such that it was decided that excavation should be undertaken to record the site before it completely eroded away. The excavation was arranged to be undertaken with two members of DAT staff and 3 volunteers from the local area who had been involved in Arfordir previously: Rhod Kemp, Babs Spittle and Liz Taylor. The PCNPA Archaeologist obtained permissions for the excavation.

The site was excavated between 14th and 18th March 2012. An initial plan of the site was drawn, followed by stratigraphic removal and recording of underlying layers. Following the removal of subsoils around the cist, a ditch like feature was noted running along the southern part of the excavation area. A few of the rounded pebbles around the cist had slumped into this feature fill 005 cut [008]. The feature was not fully excavated as it soon became apparent that it was of modern date, containing plastic and other rubbish. The feature is presumably associated with drainage works that have been undertaken by PCNPA on the promontory in recent years.

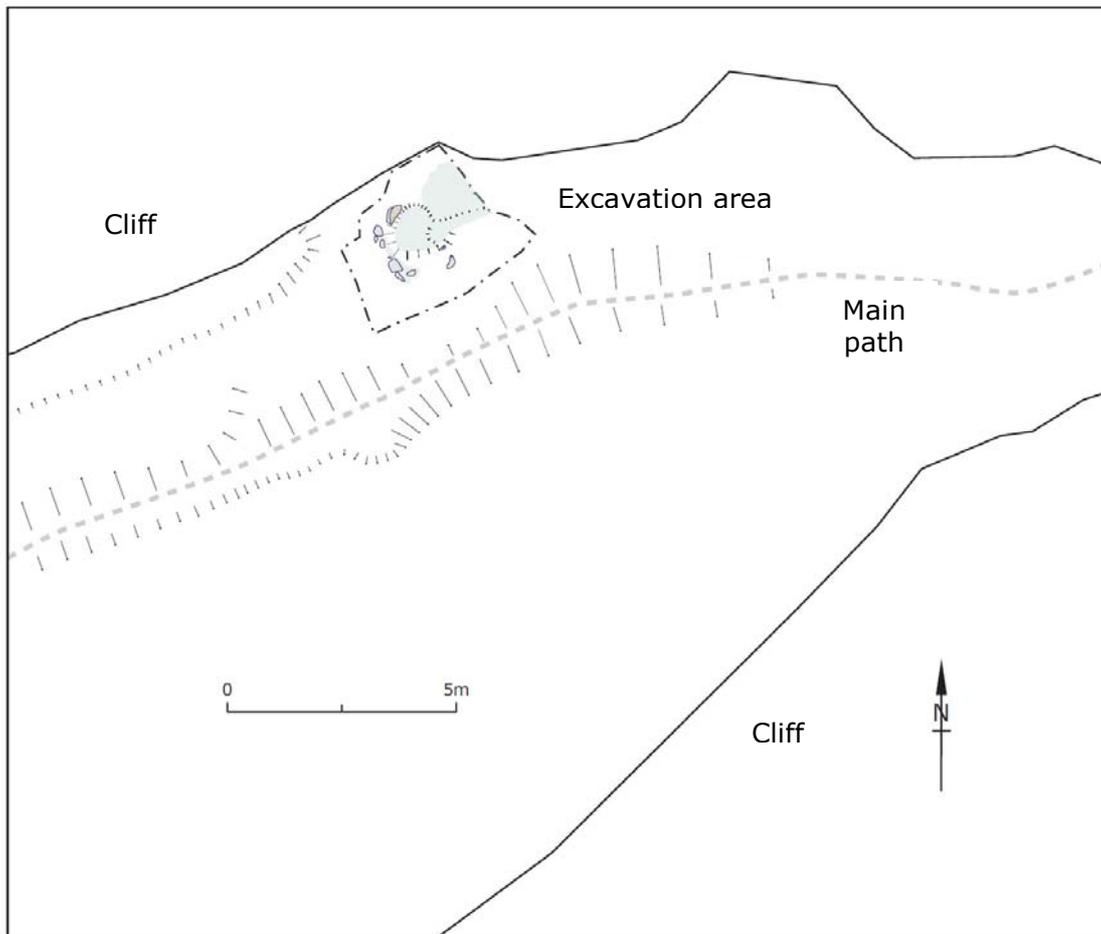


Figure 2: Location plan of cist on the Ram's Nose

The thin turf layer 001 overlay a very sandy subsoil which contained a few flint fragments, mixed with many roots and occasional bits of plastic and other rubbish (003). Layer 003 was removed in two halves to provide a profile of the deposit across the Dolerite capstone (Photo 10 & 11). The Dolerite capstone and surrounding Dolerite pebbles could also have been locally sourced from the shingle banks of the beach to the north.



Photo 10: Cist grave following removal of eastern half of subsoil (003)



Photo 11: The Dolerite capstone and surrounding rounded dolerite pebbles following removal of turf (001) and subsoils (002) & (003)

The exposed capstone was then lifted (Photo 12) revealing a number of small horizontal shale slabs had been placed on the two long sides of the cist, presumably as levelling for the capstone (Photo 13). The cist looked intact.



Photo 12: Lifting the capstone



Photo 13: The cist following removal of the capstone showing shale levelling slabs

The cist was then excavated in half centimetre spits to ascertain if any staining from organic remains were present within the fill (Photos 14 – 17). The cist measured between 0.40 and 0.42m in width and was 0.52m in length (Figure 3). It was formed by slabs of shale which may well have been cut from the natural bedrock on the promontory or nearby on the southern side of Whitesands Bay. The slab sides of the cist grave had been set within the sandy soils overlying the

bedrock which was exposed in its base. No finds or any evidence for organic staining was revealed within the fill of the cist. A number of samples were taken of the fill, although it was noted that it seemed very sterile, without any charcoal flecks or any other sign of human activity. The cist was an average depth of between 0.38 - 0.40m with an irregular shaped base formed by the bedrock (Figures 4 & 5). It is possible that the very lowest material removed from between the fissures in the bedrock was original ground surface material pre-dating the cist.



Photos 14 – 17: Excavation of the cist

Further excavation was undertaken around the cist itself (a large quadrant was excavated to the southeast) which confirmed how it had been constructed. It appears that a soil horizon survives on this part of the Ram's Nose promontory which is prehistoric in date. It comprises mostly of medium coarse sand which seems very clean, perhaps having been substantially washed through with rain and sea spray, and any organic content has long since been washed away and replaced with sand (layers 004 to the west and 005 to the west). The grave cut [016] was excavated through this soil onto bedrock and the side slabs 011 erected within the hole. It seems that this hole was excavated through the partial depth of this soil horizon, to a size larger than the eventual cist. The upright shale slabs 011 were then pushed into the lower soils till they hit bedrock (around 0.15m in depth). Once the chamber was formed, the interior of it was excavated to create an empty chamber. The exterior of the exposed upper parts of the slabs were then packed using a mix of soils, medium sized Dolerite pebbles, a few smaller pebbles and broken pieces of shale (015). The soil around the grave was then levelled off. The burial was then presumably deposited into the cist grave.

Once the burial had been laid, the capstone was placed on top, although probably it wobbled and so some levelling shale slabs were inserted on top of the side slabs of the cist. A mix of small, medium and large Dolerite pebbles were then placed over the grave. Whether a much larger mound or barrow was originally present over the cist could not be discerned from the excavation area and the amount of erosion that had already taken place at the site.

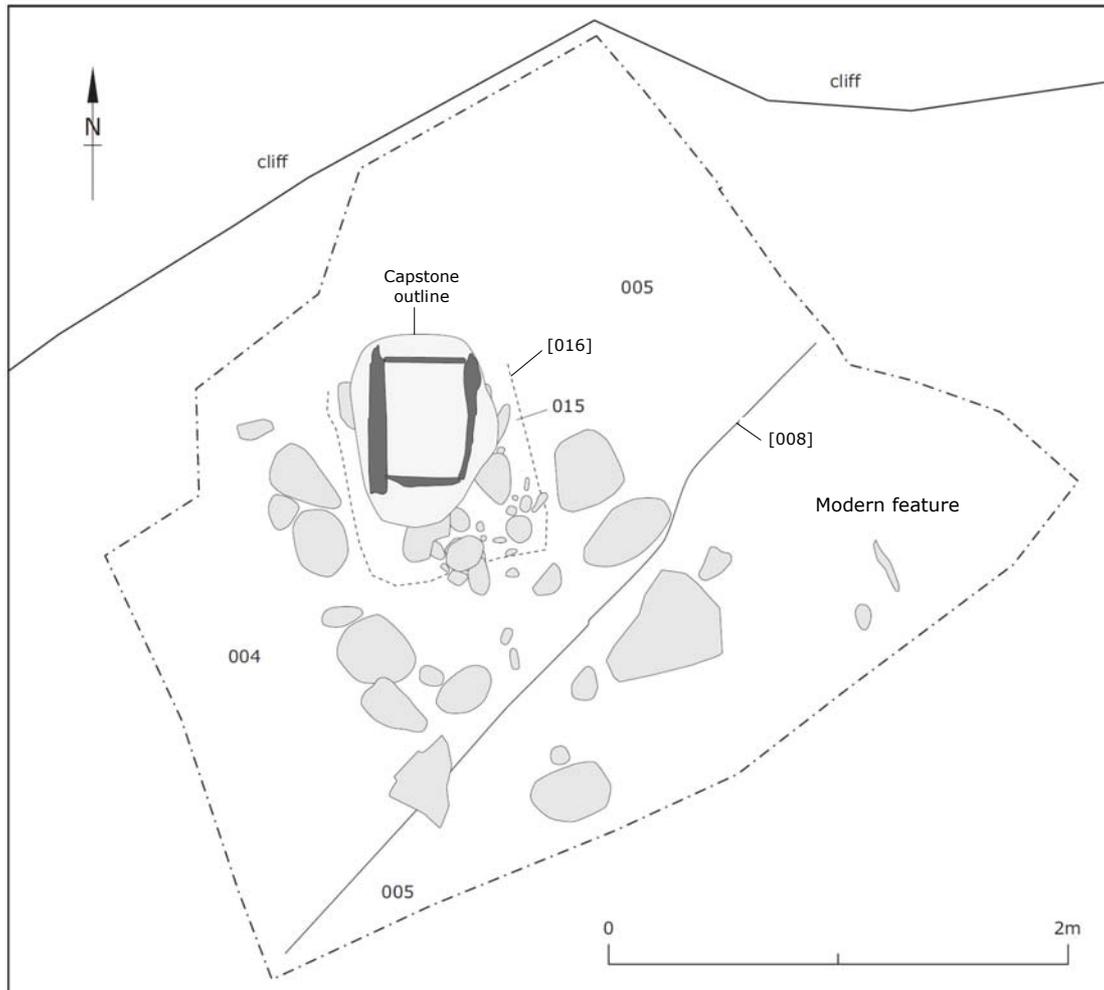


Figure 3: Showing the layout of the cist grave with outline of capstone shown over shale uprights beneath.

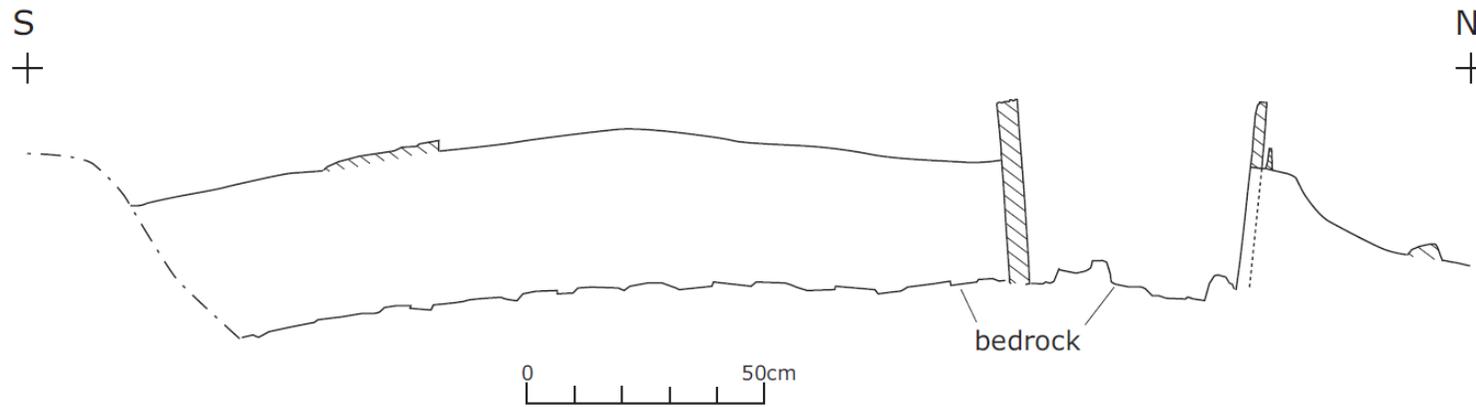


Figure 4: South to north profiles through cist and adjacent mound material or former ground surface

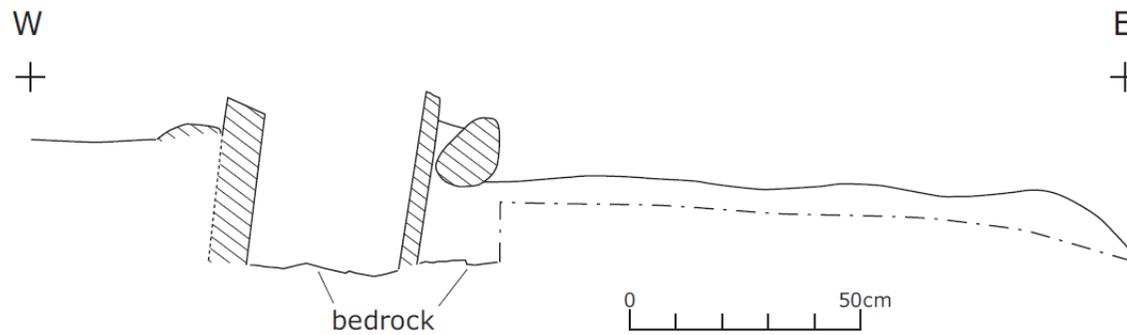


Figure 5: West to east profile through cist and adjacent mound material or former ground surface

The lack of any evidence for charcoal, ceramic material or any cremated bone, all of which should have survived the acidity of the soil at least in part, suggests that the burial was not cremated. No evidence survived for any grave goods being deposited, as noted above no staining was noted during the excavation of the soils within the cist. It is suggested that the original burial was an inhumation, possibly of a young child, which would be far more susceptible to the acidic nature of the soil. The size of the cist is also such that an adult inhumation would not have been possible, unless the deceased had been removed of all flesh, the bones then collected, disarticulated and placed into the grave. If this had been the case, then the leg bones would probably have been snapped to make them fit (this is not an unheard of practice). The loose sandy fills within the cist (fills 012, 013 and 014) are likely to be as a result of sands leaching into the chamber over time. Any organic remains have also apparently been washed through. It was noted during excavation that a looser area of fill was present within the centre of the cist. As the fills were gradually taken down, this looser area of fill moved location within the cist. No indication of staining around the edges or any other sign of a former object within the grave could be discerned, and it had all the appearance of a small animal burrow as opposed to a decayed Bronze Age artefact.

The possibility of more burials remaining beneath later accumulations of wind-blown sand in the vicinity must be considered. The volunteers who worked at the site will be monitoring the area in the future in case of other exposures.

Following completion of the recording of the site, the cist was backfilled and the capstone re-laid on top (with levelling shales also reused). The pebbles and shale fragments were piled around the sides and infilled with soils. The capstone was then covered with more soil and re-turfed with the meagre and fragmentary turf that had originally been removed. It is not anticipated that this will protect the monument from medium-term erosion, but it is hoped that it will prevent damage from curious visitors.

Further work that is required for the site is the completion of a fuller excavation report. The soil removed from the site was dry sieved with a medium fine meshed sieve and all finds / possible finds retained for further investigation. Material recovered included small quartz pebbles and fragments, all flint and occasional other stone objects of possible interest. The finds recovered will need to be processed and assessed for their provenance, as many pieces may be natural. Samples were taken from the fill of the cist, and from the possible buried soil horizon. Ideally these samples should be assessed by an environmentalist to see if there is any chance that significant environmental information may survive within them.

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE
BUDDSODDWR MEWN POBL

Paratowyd yr adroddiad hwn gan / This report has been prepared by
James Meek

Swydd / Position: Head Of Field Services

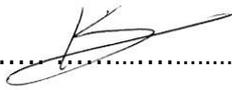
Llofnod / Signature  Date 30/03/2012

Mae'r adroddiad hwn wedi ei gael yn gywir a derbyn sêl bendith
This report has been checked and approved by

Ken Murphy

ar ran Ymddiriedolaeth Archaeolegol Dyfed Cyf.
on behalf of Dyfed Archaeological Trust Ltd.

Swydd / Position: Trust Director

Llofnod / Signature  Date 30/03/2012

*Yn unol â'n nôd i roddi gwasanaeth o ansawdd uchel, croesawn unrhyw sylwadau
sydd gennych ar gynnwys neu strwythur yr adroddiad hwn*

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