

CPAT Report No 1126

The Neolithic Chambered Tombs of Breconshire



THE CLWYD-POWYS ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

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January 2012

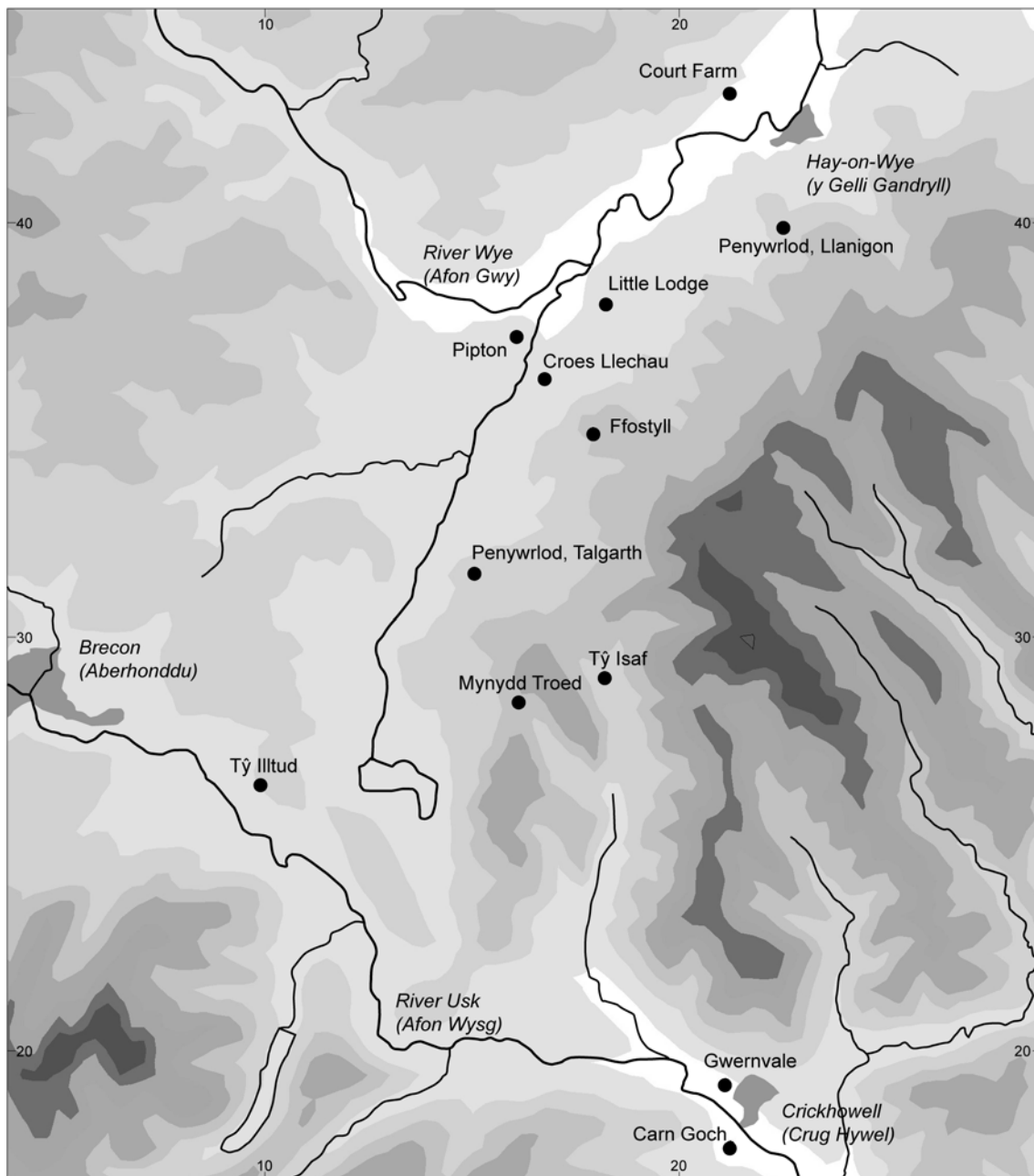
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Front cover: The main chamber at Tŷ Illtud chambered tomb. Photo CPAT 3393-0084

Introduction

Neolithic chambered tombs are found throughout Europe and are amongst the oldest surviving man-made structures, built as the communal burial places of the earliest farmers. Tombs of this date are known across Wales, although Breconshire has an unusual concentration in the south-east of the county, on the lower slopes of the Black Mountains and the slopes overlooking the valleys of the Wye and Usk.

All of the Breconshire sites fall within a class generally referred to as ‘Cotswold-Severn Tombs’, so named because their distribution is predominantly focused around the Severn Estuary, in south-east Wales, the Cotswolds, and parts of Somerset, Wiltshire and Berkshire. Although each of the Breconshire tombs is distinct, their very eccentricity of plan defines them as a group separate from those in the rest of Wales or western England (Lynch *et al.* 2000). This report provides a summary of each of the tombs, with reference to their Primary Record Number (PRN) recorded in the regional Historic Environment Record.



The distribution of the Breconshire chambered tombs

Cotswold-Severn tombs

The Cotswold-Severn chambered tombs are trapezoidal, stone-built cairns which vary considerably in size from only 15m in length to over 50m, the largest being at Penywrlod, Talgarth. The basic plan includes one or more chambers built of large, upright slabs and covered by a capstone, which were accessed via passages that may also have used upright slabs, together with dry-stone walling. These allowed repeated access to the chambers during the life of the tomb and may have been blocked and unblocked a number of times.

Although tombs within this group are very diverse, there is general agreement that they can be divided into three main sub-types: tombs with simple terminal chambers without a passage or transepts; those with terminal transepted chambers, which have a central passage entered from one end with side chambers arranged in pairs; and sites with multiple lateral chambers with independent entrances from one or both sides of the cairn. The most complex sites are those in the third category, with examples at Penywrlod Talgarth, Gwernvale, Pipton and Tŷ Isaf (RCAHMW 1997, 27-8).

The chambers were buried beneath a mound of stone, the shape of which was defined by dry-stone revetment walls which retained the cairn material, sometimes incorporating double walls, as at Pipton and Gwernvale. At the wider end of the tomb the walls turned inwards to form a forecourt, which may have been used for ceremony and ritual. Frequently the forecourt was blocked by a large, upright slab, or false portal, giving the impression of chamber beyond (Burrow 2006, 52-4).

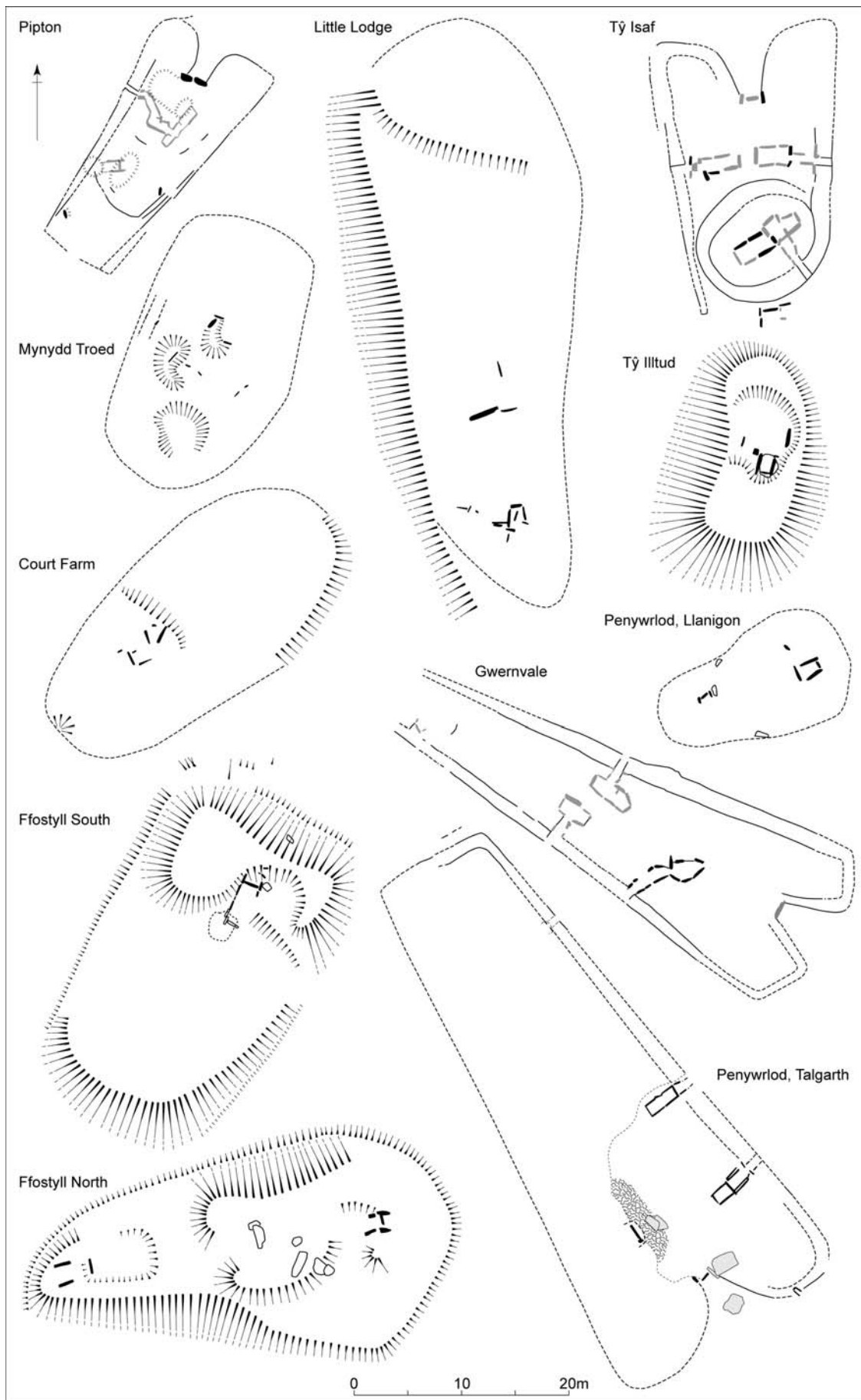
Although most of the chambered tombs which have been excavated appear to have been built in a single phase, there are a some which seem to incorporate an earlier, round cairn, as at Tŷ Isaf, while the cairn at Pipton seems to have been lengthened after its initial construction. The excavations at Penywrlod Talgarth and Gwernvale have both produced dates of around 3,900 cal. BC, indicating that they are amongst the earliest examples of this type of tomb in Britain as a whole (Lynch *et al.* 2000, 69).

The tombs are often viewed as ‘houses of the dead’ which were in use over a protracted period, the chambers being sealed and unsealed a number of times. Although one might assume that ceremony and ritual may well have played a part in their use, supporting excavated evidence is scarce, with most sites only producing a small number of objects, with occasional pottery vessels and a few stone tools. It is often thought that the alignment of prehistoric monuments was of some significance and while this may be true the only common feature of the Breconshire tombs is that they are all positioned towards the eastern half of the horizon, though without an obvious relationship to the position of the sun at any particular time of the year (Burrow 2006, 88-9).

Access

It is a sad fact that only four of the chambered tombs have any formal public access: Gwernvale, Mynydd Troed, Penywrlod Talgarth and Penywrlod Llanigon. However, permission to visit the remaining sites may be sought from their respective landowners and information is provided for each of the tombs. With the exception of Gwernvale, the sites are all on farmland and visitors should follow the Countryside Code:

- Leave gates and property as you find them
- Protect plants and animals and take your litter home
- Keep dogs under close control
- Consider other people



Comparative plans of the Breconshire chambered tombs showing the range in size and orientation

Court Farm

Grid reference: SO 2122 4315

Access: Private land with no public access: permission may be sought from Clyro Court Farm

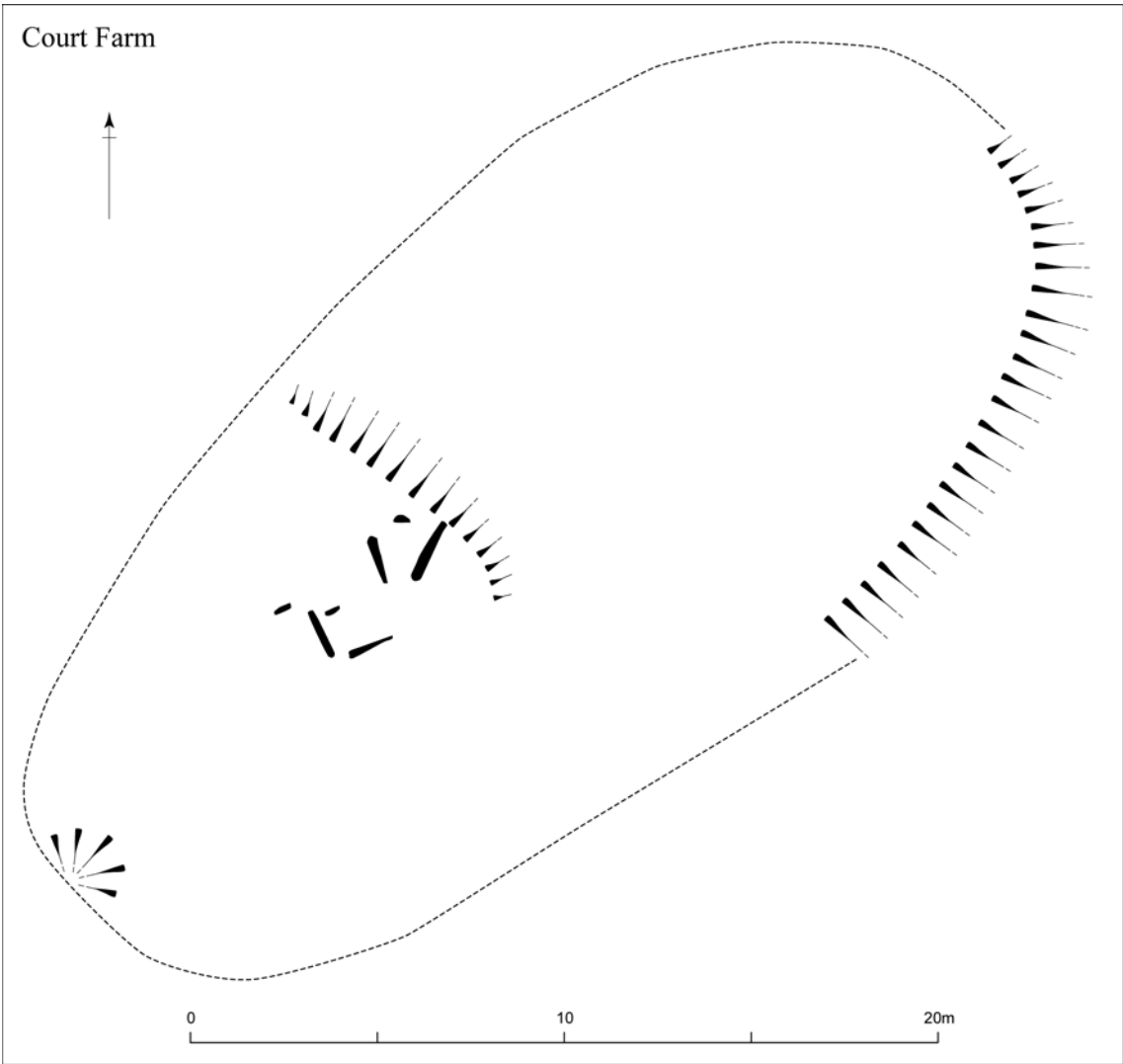
Excavations: None

PRN: 2170

Although sited just across the River Wye in Radnorshire, the remains of the chambered tomb at Court Farm, near Clyro, should be regarded as part of the group of tombs that are otherwise in south-east Breconshire. The site was first recognised by W. E. Griffiths in 1973 and consists of an elongated mound around 32m long, up to 16.5m wide and a maximum of 1.1m in height (RCAHMW 1997, 63-4). A number of edge-set slabs are visible defining the remains of one, or perhaps two chambers, although with no indication of an access passage.



A view of the upright slabs marking position of one, or perhaps two central burial chambers at Court Farm, Clyro. Photo CPAT 3393-0025



Court Farm chambered tomb near Clyro (after RCAHMW 1997)

Ffostyll

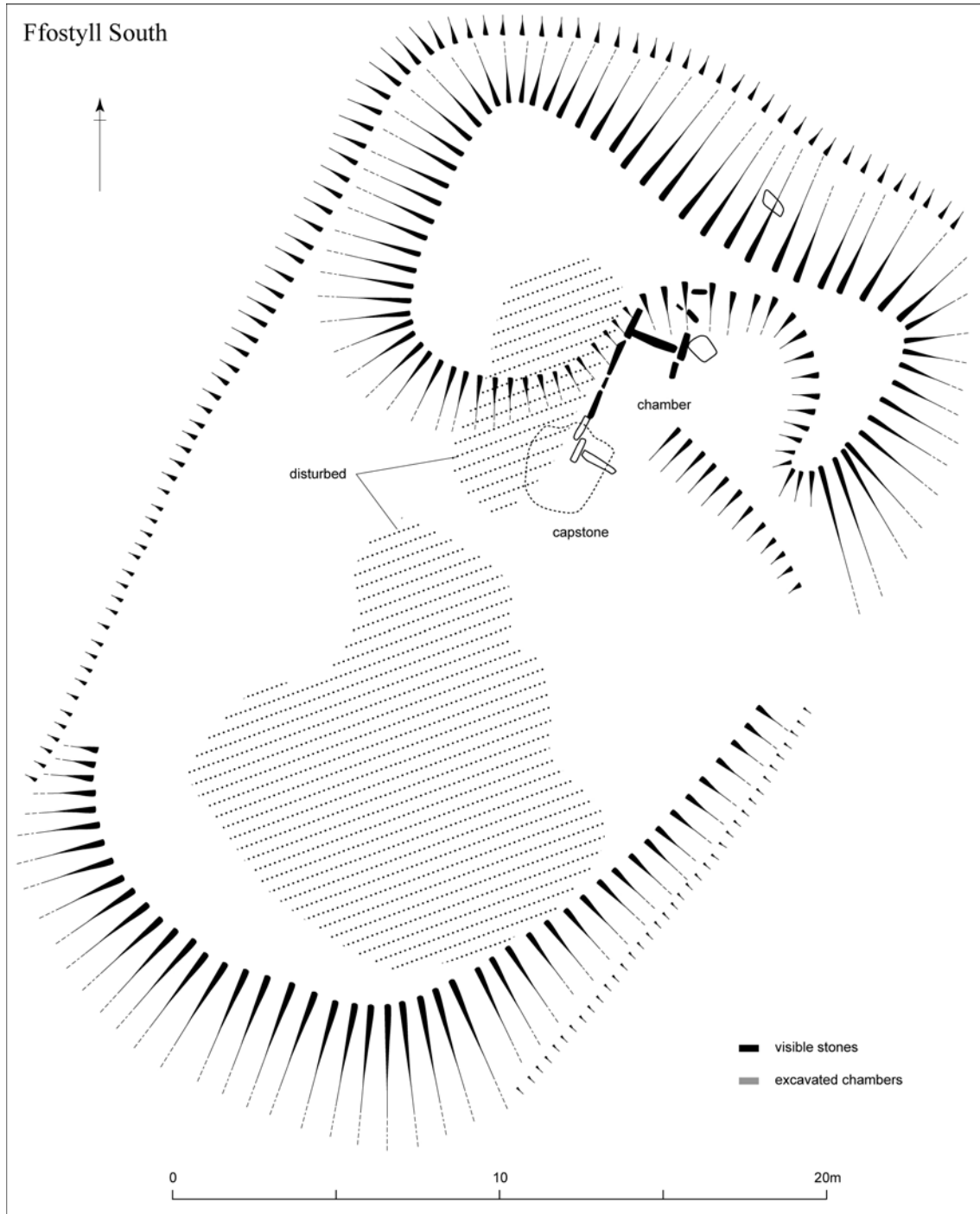
Grid reference: SO 1789 3490

Access: Private land, no public access: permission may be sought from Ffostyll farm

Excavations: Vulliamy 1921-3

PRNs: 552 and 553

Ffostyll, lying 2.5km north-east of Talgarth, is unusual in having two chambered tombs in close proximity, both of which were investigated by Vulliamy between 1921 and 1923 (Vulliamy 1921; 1922; 1923). The southern tomb had been disturbed in 1875 when quantities of human bones were uncovered during quarrying for road stone.



Ffostyll South chambered tomb (after RCAHMW 1997 and Vulliamy 1921)

Vulliamy's excavations uncovered the main chamber, which measured 3.3m by 1.2m, the floor of which was covered by a large quantity of human bones and teeth, representing nine or more individuals of both sexes and various ages, as well as some remains of domestic animals. Further burials were revealed outside the chamber, as well as some pottery and pieces of flint and chert. The available evidence suggests that this may have been a form of terminally transepted tomb. The remains of the cairn now consist of a long mound around 36m long and up to 23m wide, which tapers slightly from the north, standing up to 2m high at the northern end, but no more than 0.5m towards the south. Seven upright sandstone slabs are visible towards the northern end, defining the remains of the chamber (RCAHMW 1997, 41-3).



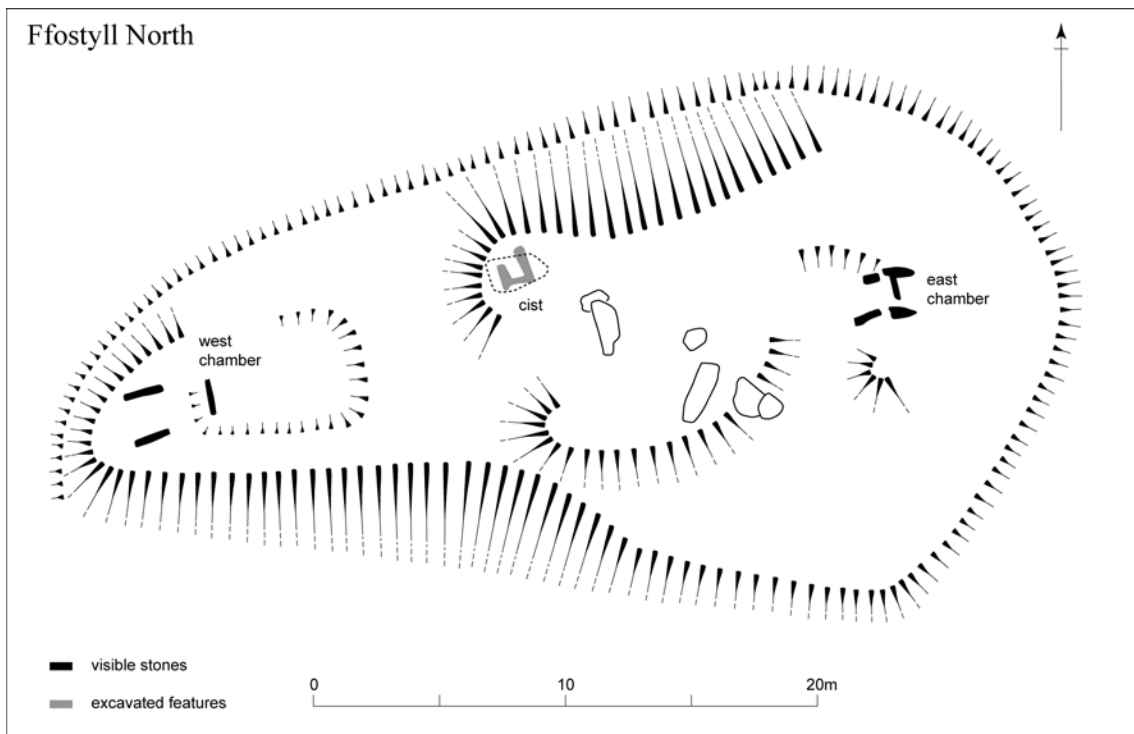
Part of the main chamber at Ffostyll South, viewed from the south. Photo CPAT 3393-0041

The northern tomb is the larger of the two and had also been disturbed before Vulliamy's excavations of 1922, the exposed eastern chamber having been robbed. A western chamber was discovered, as well as a covered cist located in the middle of the north side of the mound. The chamber contained human remains, together with those of domestic animals, some flint flakes and pottery. The cist contained the remains of six or seven individuals, including two children.

The cairn has clearly seen significant past disturbance and now measures 41.5m in length and is up to 22.0m wide, tapering towards the west. The exposed slabs of the eastern chamber form a striking feature with five upright stones well-set within the mound. The site of the western chamber is marked by two side-slabs, with a further slab to the east which is set at right angles and presumably marks the end of the chamber (RCAHMW 1997, 43-6; Vulliamy 1923).



The east chamber at Ffostyll North, viewed from the north-west. Photo CPAT 3393-0050



Ffostyll North chambered tomb (after RCAHMW 1997 and Vulliamy 1923)

Gwernvale

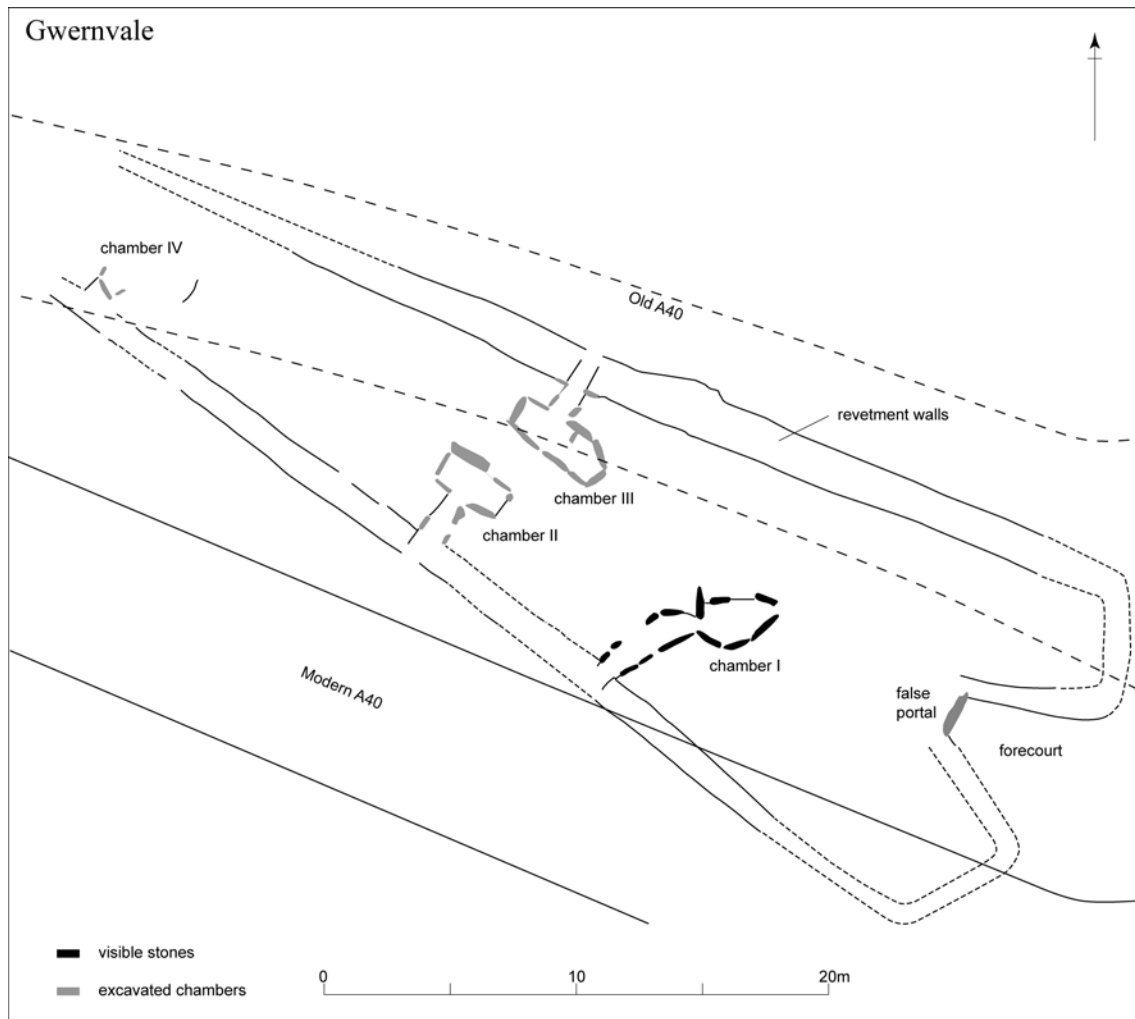
Grid reference: SO 2111 1921

Access: Located on the grass verge alongside the A40

Excavations: Colt Hoare 1804; Britnell 1977-8

PRN: 687

Gwernvale, near Crickhowell, is a good example of a lateral-chambered tomb, which, by virtue of its position next to the A40, is the most accessible site in the county. It was the realignment of the road that led to a major excavation in 1977-78, prior to which only one chamber (chamber I) was visible, although the site had previously been the subject of antiquarian excavations in 1804. Sadly, the site today is but a poor reflection of its former state, sited on the roadside verge with only the main orthostats surviving and the extent of the cairn marked by concrete blocks.



Gwernvale chambered tomb (after Britnell and Savoury 1979)

The site had been known since at least the early 19th century and the main chamber was the subject of investigation by Colt Hoare in 1804. The 1970s excavations revealed evidence for pre-cairn activity dating from the Mesolithic, as well as Neolithic occupation beneath the east end of the cairn. Double dry-stone revetment walls originally surrounded the cairn, which measured just over 45m in length, up to 17m wide near the east end. It contained a forecourt with a false portal, and narrowing to 6.5m at the west end. Originally the cairn would have stood to at least 2.5m high at the false portal, dropping to perhaps only 0.5m at the west end. The cairn evidently had several phases of construction and use, beginning with the erection of the four chambers and their main passages. The chambers were opened and re-blocked intermittently, perhaps over a period of 600 years from its erection around the end of the fourth millennium BC (RCAHMW 1997, 56-60; Britnell and Savoury 1979).



Left: The main chamber (chamber I) at Gwernvale before excavation

Below: The excavations viewed from the north-west, with the revetment walls and the main chamber clearly visible.



Little Lodge

Grid reference: SO 1822 3806

Access: Private land with no public access: permission may be sought from Little Lodge farm

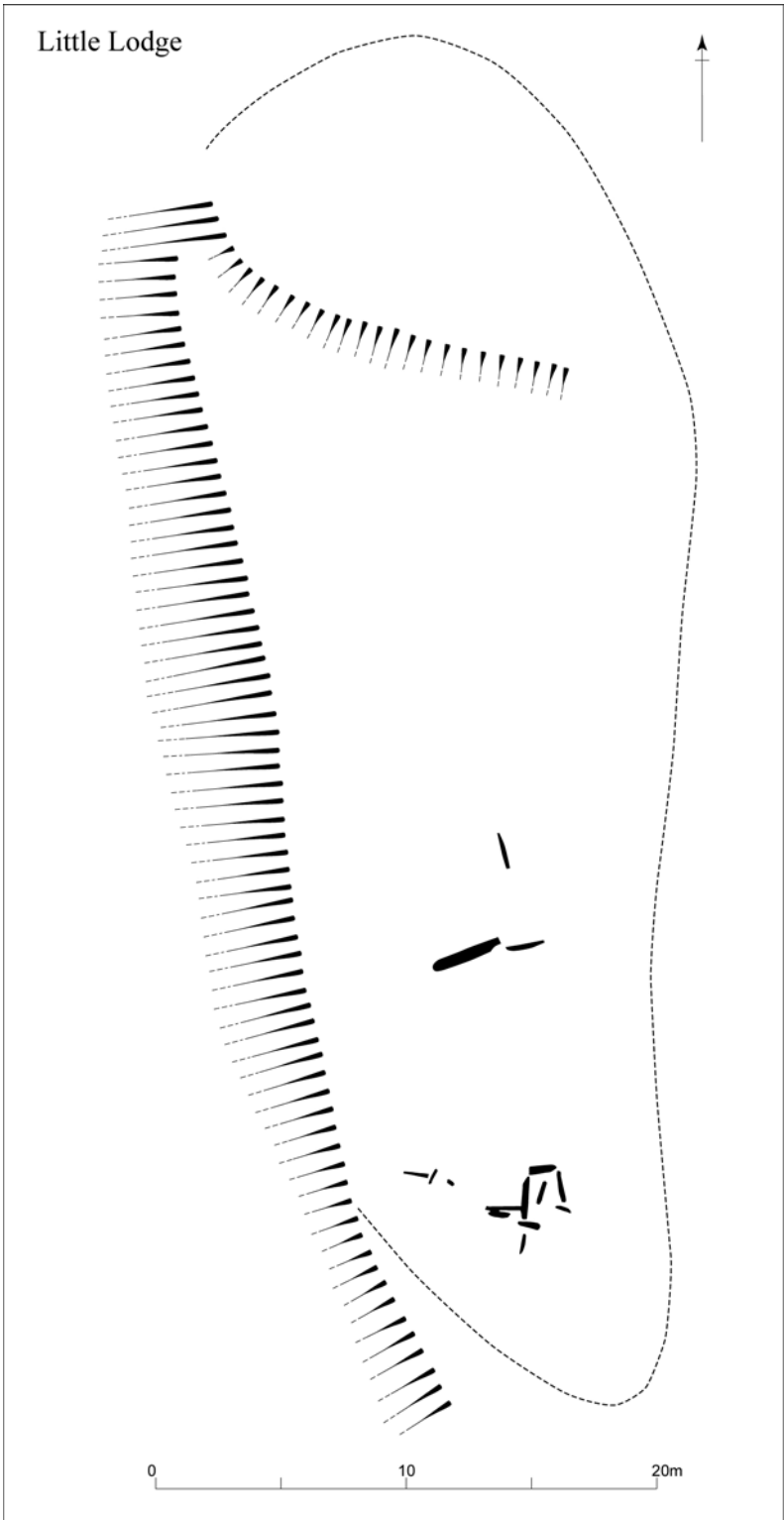
Excavations: Vulliamy 1929

PRN: 512

The Little Lodge tomb, near Three Cocks, was first described and is still best known from excavations by Vulliamy in 1929, which revealed a major chamber complex just south of the mound's centre, with a contiguous pair of small chambers in the south end. The main chamber contained many unburnt human bones, representing one youth and four adults, mostly male. The site is extensively robbed, and the mound survives to a maximum height of only 1.8m, with a number of large, upright slabs exposed, giving some impression of the chambers. The surrounding mound forms a broad platform 55.5m long north to south, with a maximum width of 22m, although this has clearly been truncated by ploughing (RCAHMW 1997, 51-3; Vulliamy 1929).



The main chamber at Little Lodge, viewed from the north-east. Photo CPAT 3393-0014



Little Lodge chambered tomb (after RCAHMW 1997)

Mynydd Troed

Grid reference: SO 1614 2843

Access: Open access with limited parking nearby

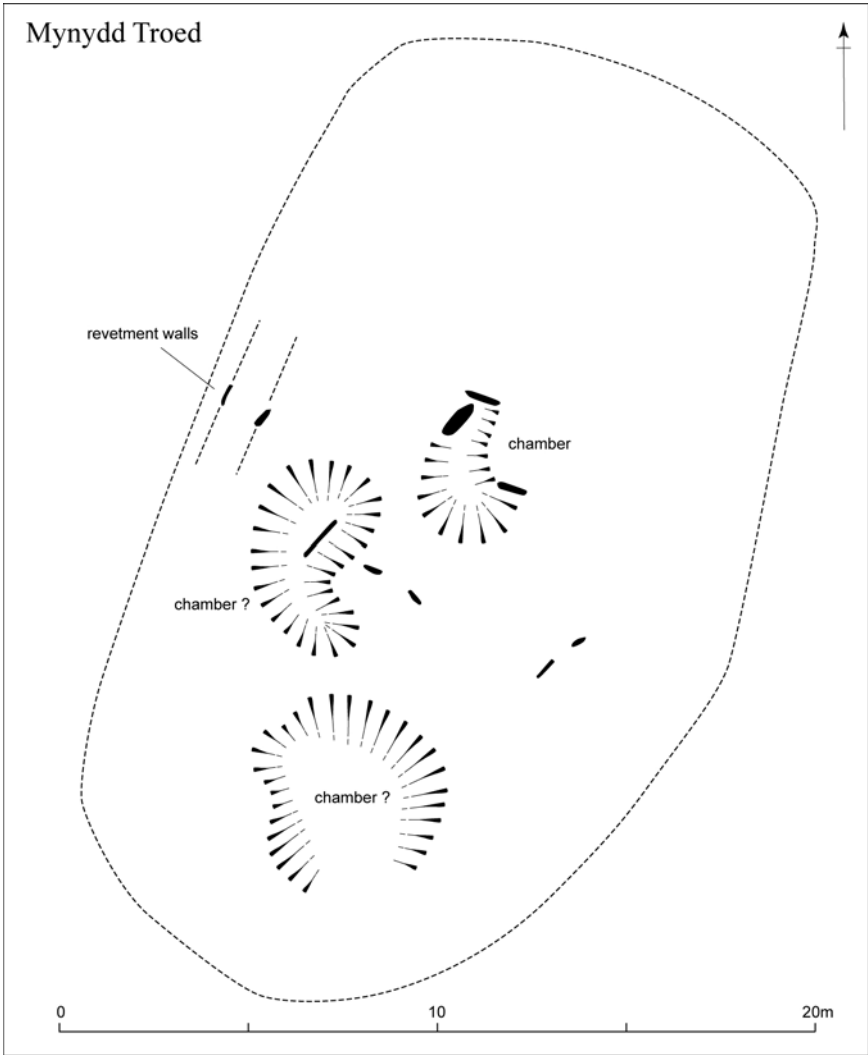
Excavations: Crampton and Webley 1966

PRN: 638

Sited on the north side of the col between Mynydd Troed and Mynydd Llangorse is another chambered tomb which may belong to the terminal-chambered group. The site was discovered by O. G. S. Crawford in 1921, when only two uprights were visible, and trial excavations were undertaken in 1966 by Crampton and Webley. This revealed a revetment wall surrounding the cairn, which measured around 26m in length and up to 15m wide, standing to a maximum height of 1.4m. The cairn is known to have had at least one chamber, defined by three upstanding stones, while hollows suggest the presence of two other chambers (RCAHMW 1997, 35-6).



The visible remains of the chamber at Mynydd Troed. Photo CPAT 3215-0006



Mynydd Troed chambered tomb (after RCAHMW 1997)

Penywrlod, Llanigon

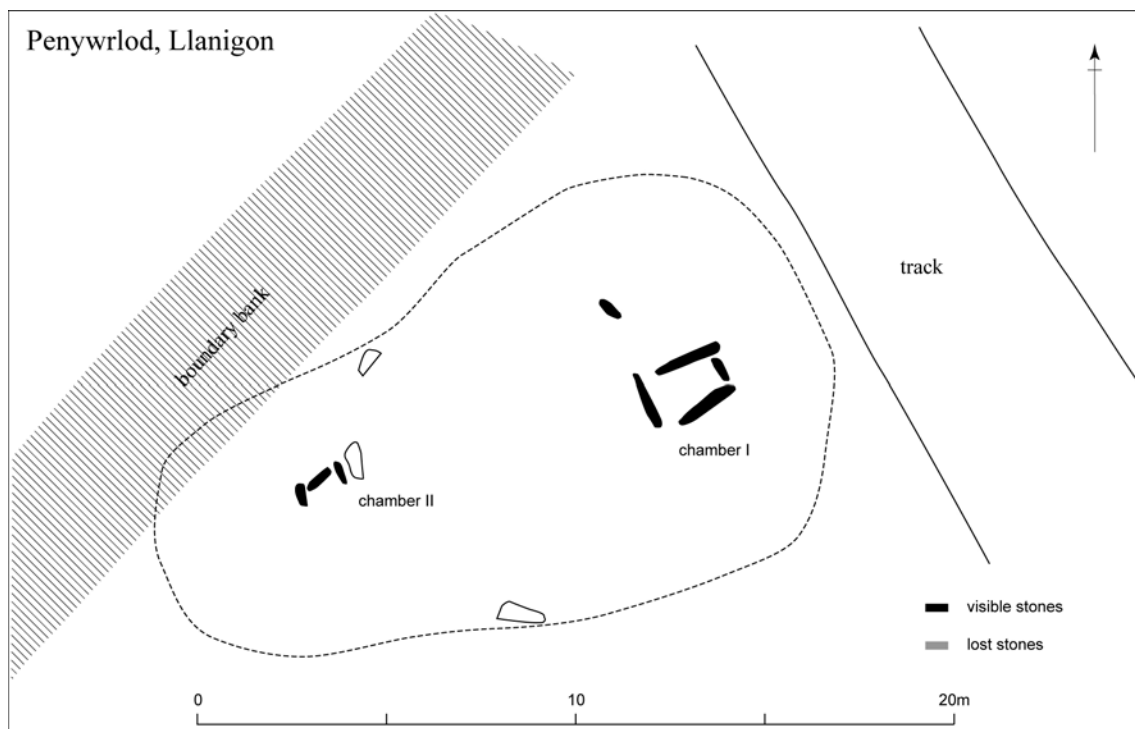
Grid reference: S0 2248 3988

Access: Private land, although adjacent to a public footpath

Excavations: Vulliamy 1920-1

PRN: 1062

Another variation on the terminal chambered tomb is the site at Penywrlod, near Llanigon, which was excavated by the Woolhope Club in 1920-21, who cleared the main chamber and revealed a second, smaller chamber at the western end. The main chamber measured 1.7m by 0.7m, defined by large upright slabs, and this remains the most impressive surviving feature, although part of the other chamber is also visible. The surviving mound is irregular, measuring around 18m in length and up to 9.5m wide. As well as primary burials, the excavation spoil also yielded various Roman artefacts, including a coin of Crispus (AD 317-326) (RCAHMW 1997, 60-2).



Penywrlod, Llanigon chambered tomb (after RCAHMW 1997 and Vulliamy 1922)



The main chamber at Penyworlod, Llanigon, viewed from the east. Photo CPAT 3393-0034

Penywylod, Talgarth

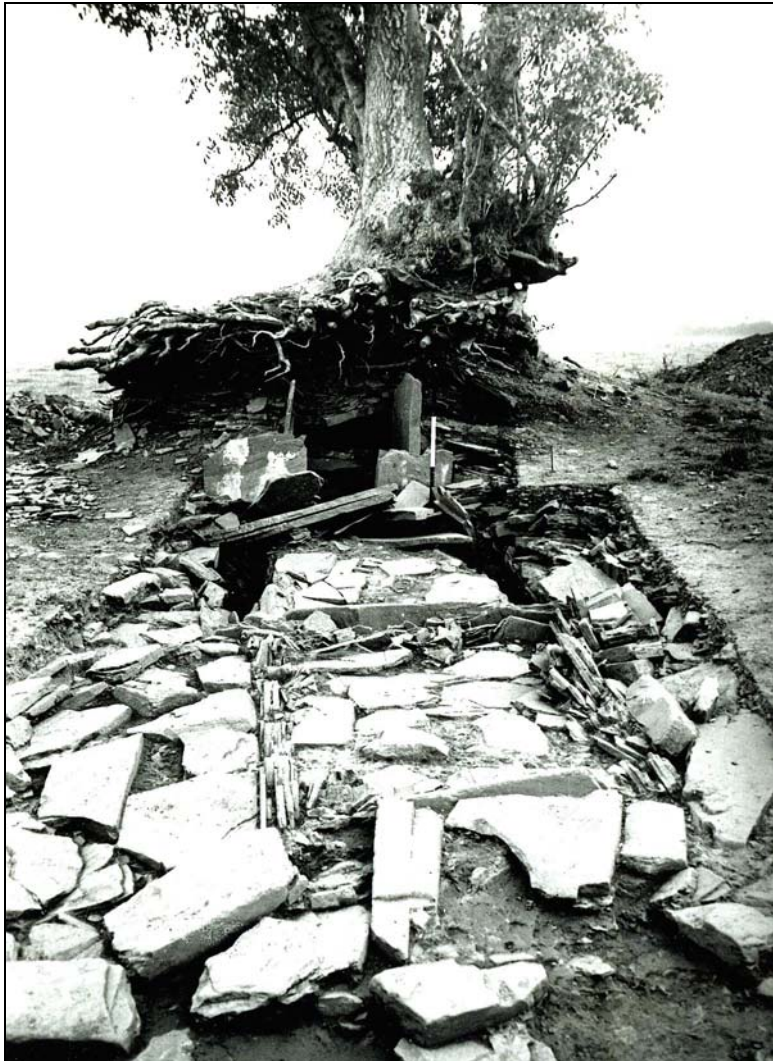
Grid reference: S0 1505 3156

Access: Private land, but with a permissive path and roadside parking

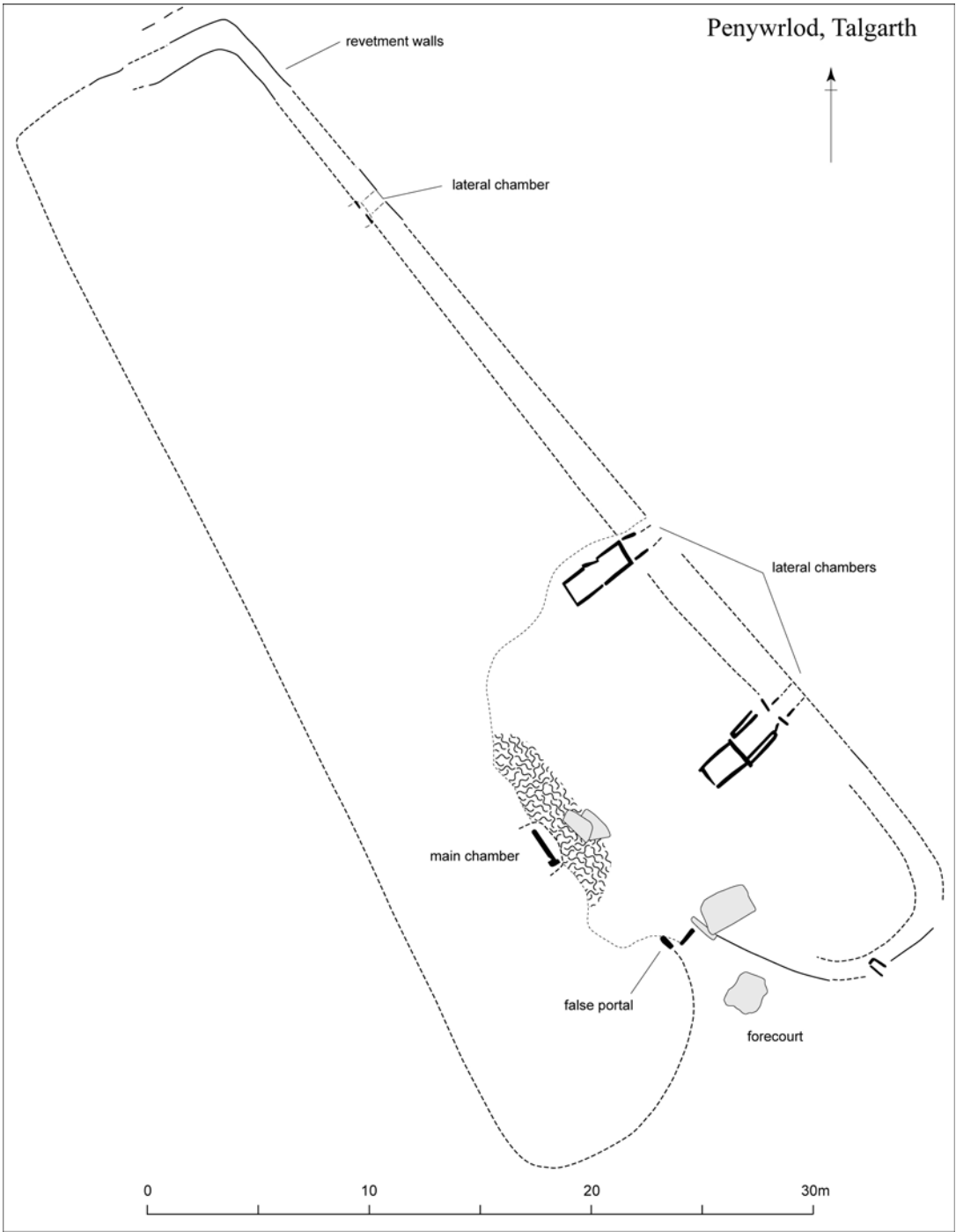
Excavation: Savory, 1972

PRN: 568

The largest and most substantial long cairn of the Black Mountains group is located 400m south of Penywylod Farm, near Talgarth. The site was only discovered in 1972 when agricultural quarrying exposed part of the internal structures. Limited excavations were undertaken at the time, examining and recording the disturbed areas (Britnell and Savoury 1984). The excavations revealed revetment walls at the north-east corner of the narrower, north-western end, around most of the south-eastern side of a forecourt with the remains of a dummy entrance, or false portal, and adjacent to the entrances of three side-chambers on the north-east side. So defined, the cairn was 52m long, and around 22.5m wide across the broader, south-east end, narrowing to 11m at the other end. The quarrying had removed much of the south-east corner of the mound, exposing two orthostats of the main chamber, while of the three lateral chambers on the north-east side, one had been almost totally destroyed, another had lost its coverstones and some of the side slabs, while the third was essentially undisturbed (RCAHMW 1997, 38-40). Despite the obvious damage, the cairn is still an impressive monument, the majority of which remains largely intact.



The remains of one of the lateral chambers during the excavation in 1972



Penywrlod, Talgarth chambered tomb (after Britnell and Savory 1984)

Pipton

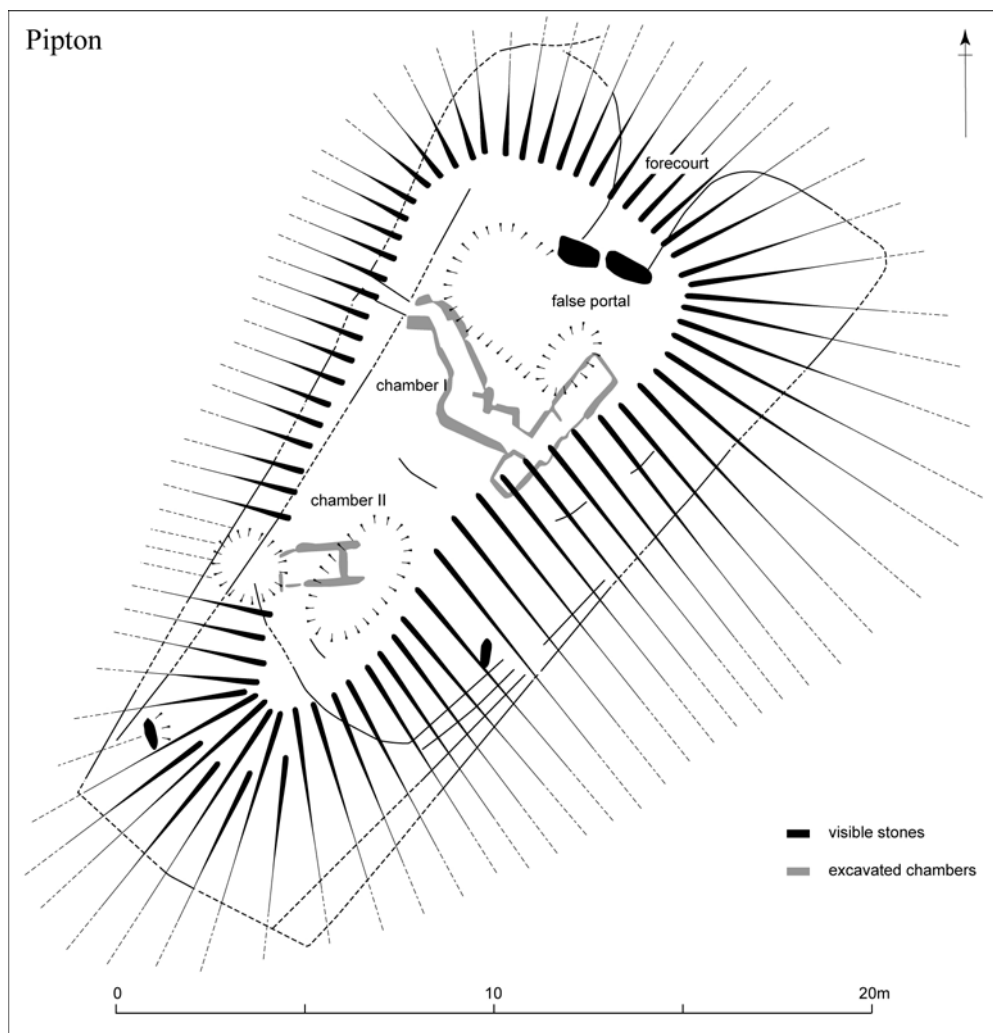
Grid reference: SO 1604 3727

Access: Private land, no public access: permission may be sought from Pipton

Excavation: Savory 1949

PRN: 511

The tomb at Pipton was excavated by Savory in 1949 for the Brecknock Society and the National Museum of Wales. The excavations revealed that the original cairn was wedge-shaped, 32m long, 16m wide near the north-east end, where the forecourt had a false portal 2.5m wide, and was around 10m wide at the south-west end. The cairn was up to 2m high, the tallest element being one of the two portal stones at 2.4m. Within the cairn only two chambers were identified: Chamber I was only 5.5m from the portal and was entered from the north-west side; and Chamber II was apparently a closed cist on the same side. An internal revetment wall curved across the cairn to the south-west of each of the chambers. The appearance of the cairn today is rather less impressive than the excavation results might suggest. Its main visible structure comprises two large slabs forming the portal at the north-east end and there are only two other stones now showing, both of which have previously been described as possible buttresses. One of them is midway along the south-east side, the other near the south-west end. There is a hollow in the mound between the portal and the position of Chamber I, and another hollow on the north-west side which marks the position of Chamber II (RCAHMW 1997, 48-51).



Pipton chambered tomb (after RCAHMW 1997 and Savoury 1949)



The chambered tomb at Pipton, viewed from the east with the stones of the false portal just visible on top of the mound, on the right. Photo CPAT 3393-0006

Tŷ Illtud

Grid reference: S0 0984 2638

Access: Private land, no public access

Excavation: None

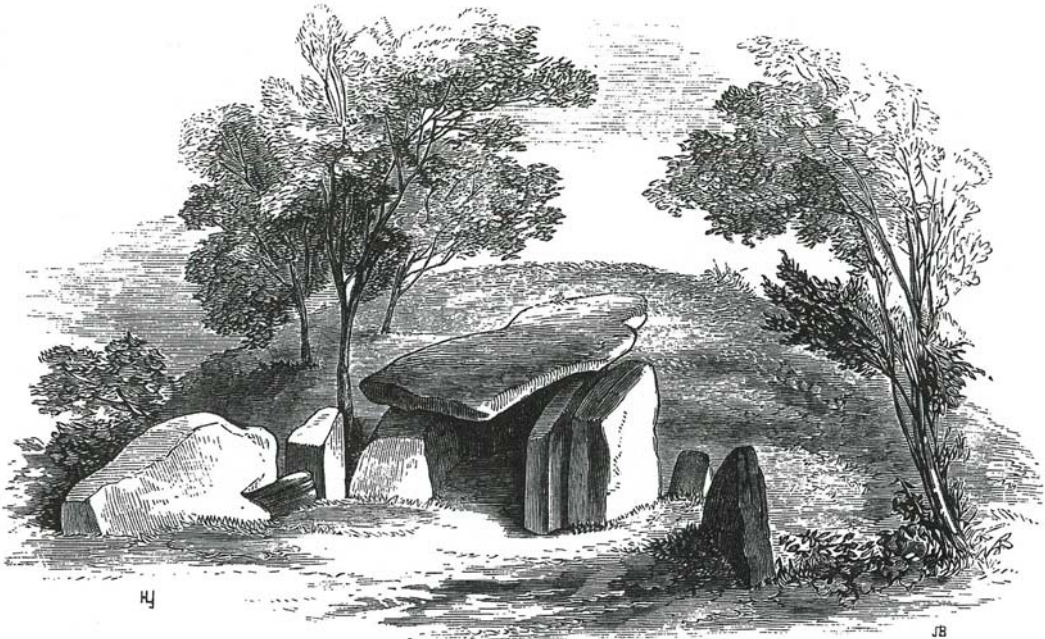
PRN: 50434

Of those sites with more simple chambers, Tŷ Illtud is perhaps the more interesting on the basis of its later use. Set slightly apart from the rest of the Black Mountains group, Tŷ Illtud lies west of Llangors, overlooking the Usk valley. It is possible that this was the site referred to by John Aubrey when relating the excavation of a cairn in the parish of Llansantffraid around 1612.

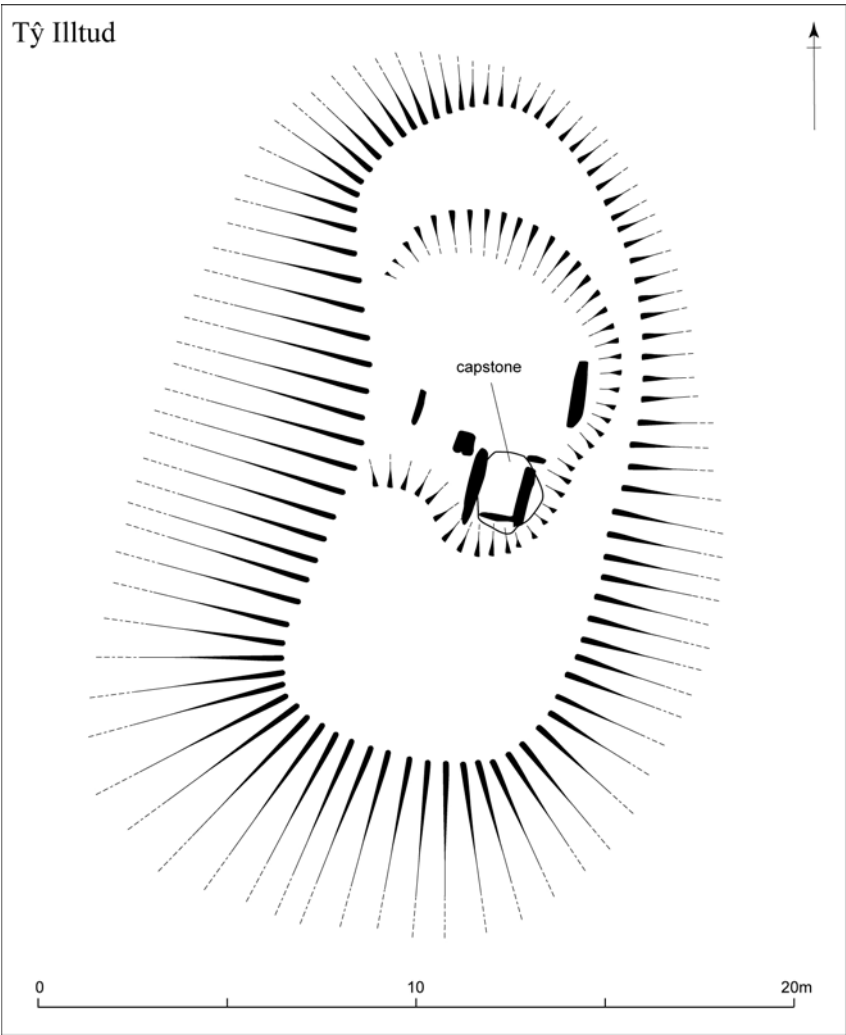
There is a single chamber within the body of the cairn which has been denuded by quarrying and ploughing. The chamber is formed by two large upright side slabs and an end slab supporting a massive capstone (Plate 1). The chamber opens to the north, beyond which are a further five stones, possibly associated with another chamber, or perhaps part of a forecourt. What is of particular interest is the range of graffiti with over 70 symbols carved on five of the stones, including dates of 1510 and 'mcccxii', leading to suggestions that the site may have been used as a hermit's cell (RCAHMW 1997, 31-34). Sadly, the sandstone is now laminating and many of the carvings have been lost or are no longer apparent.



The main chamber at Tŷ Illtud, viewed from the south. Photo CPAT 3393-0083



Henry Longueville Jones's engraving of Tŷ Illtud in 1867 (from *Archaeologia Cambrensis* 22, 1867)



Tŷ Illtud chambered tomb (after RCAHMW 1997)

Tŷ Isaf

Grid reference: SO 1819 2906

Access: Private land, no public access: permission may be sought from Tŷ Isaf farm

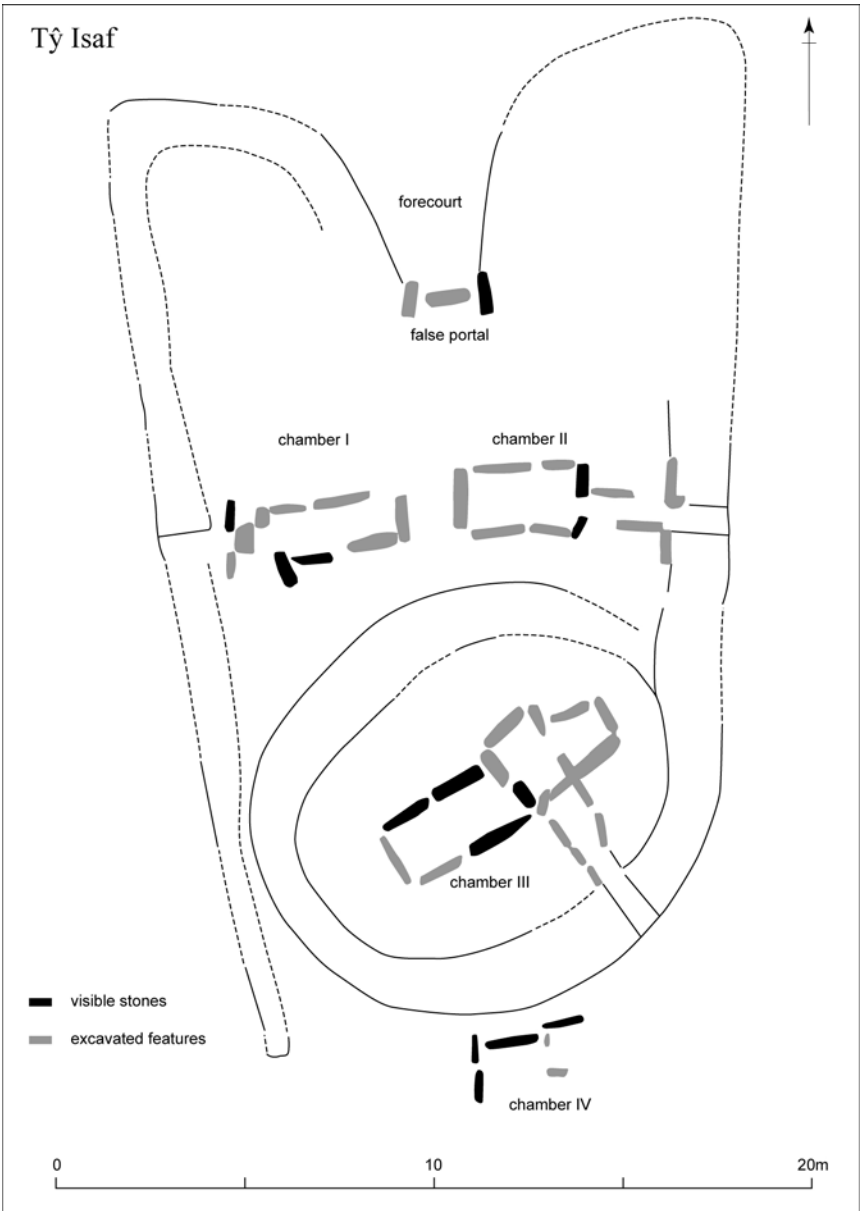
Excavation: Grimes 1938

PRN: 639

Like Pipton and Gwernvale, the present form of the chambered tomb at Tŷ Isaf, between Talgarth and Cwmdru, gives little impression of its complex structure. The site was discovered by O.G.S. Crawford in 1921, and was excavated by Grimes in 1938. Double dry-stone revetment walls surrounded a cairn aligned north to south, 30.2m long and at least 17m wide, reducing to 13.5m to the south, with a maximum height of 1.5m. A forecourt with a false portal at the northern end, was accompanied by a pair of chambers placed back to back and entered independently from the sides of the cairn, with a third chamber at the southern end, entered from the east. An unusual feature, distinguishing Tŷ Isaf from the previous three sites, was a double-walled rotunda towards the centre of the cairn which was linked with the revetment walls on the east side, and enclosed a large transepted gallery, entered from the south-east. The chambers had been used as ossuaries for the deposition of disarticulated bones. Two of the chambers collectively had the remains of at least 26 individuals, while one chamber had a single individual, with two burials in the passage, and the other chamber had only cremated bone and the base of a Bronze Age cinerary urn (RCAHMW 1997, 36-8).



Chamber III at Tŷ Isaf,
looking towards Pen
Trumau



Tŷ Isaf chambered tomb (after RCAHMW 1997 and Grimes 1939)

Possible and lost tombs:

Carn Goch

Grid reference: SO 2122 1771

Access: Site within a recreation area with public access

Excavation: None

PRN: 691

There is some uncertainty regarding the nature of the remains at Carn Goch, which lies on the edge of Llangattock. The site consists of a large mound around 17m in diameter and 1.4m high within which a single chamber was discovered by workmen in 1847. The chamber was 2.6m long, 1.2m wide and 0.7m high and contained the skeletal remains of perhaps a single individual. It is possible that this was a large cist within a later Bronze Age round barrow, rather than the remains of a chambered tomb. Apart from the mound itself the visible remains consist of a large slab, possibly the capstone, beneath which two further stones are just visible (RCAHMW 1997, 54-6).

Croes Llechau

Grid reference: SO 1672 3626

Access: Private land with no public access

Excavation: None

PRN: 515

The site at Croes Llechau was described by Edward Lhuyd around 1700 and survived in some form at least until 1802 when it was noted by Colt Hoare, although today there is no visible trace. It appears to have included a main chamber at the eastern end with a possible false portal nearby, a second chamber at the west end and a small side chamber (RCAHMW 1997, 47-8).

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