

FIELD TRIP – 2 SEPTEMBER 2011 - FFYNNON BEUNO CAVES

A chance conversation, following a recent visit to Moel y Gaer Hillfort at Bodfari, led two Society Members to investigate an excavation at Ffynnon Beuno Caves near Tremeirchion.

The Vale of Clwyd dominates the geography and forms one of the most distinctive landscapes of north east Wales. On the east, the vale is bounded by the edge of the Clwydian Hills which rise steeply to about 300m above sea level, their summits commanding spectacular prospects of the valley floor below. The western side rises more gently towards the Denbighshire uplands some 7km away. The best surviving and most complete, typical historic part of the vale identified here lies mainly south and east of the medieval town of Denbigh.



Excavations outside the cave © Maria Blagojevic

Early man inhabited the twin cave sites at Cae Gwyn and Ffynnon Beuno, Tremeirchion, where animal bone and human Palaeolithic tool-bearing deposits have been found. However, the most striking archaeological monuments in this landscape are the Iron Age hillforts of Foel Fenlli, Moel y Gaer (Llanbedr Dyffryn Clwyd), Moel Arthur, Penycloddiau and Moel y Gaer (Bodfari) which form part of a defensive chain of sites crowning the summits of the Clwydian Hills. Even as individual, often quite large sites (Penycloddiau encloses an area of some 21ha), they are impressive, but together they form a unique group of hillforts in Wales that demonstrates the intimate relationship in landscape of natural landform and human territory.

Although there has been little modern excavation on any of the sites, current understanding suggests that each hillfort would

have been the focal point of a well-defined territory extending across the vale beneath, and over the uplands to the east, so that each fort would have access to the same range of natural resources. The upland area of the Clwydian Hills is mostly rough grazing, but the valley bottom is, by contrast, rich agricultural land with enclosures encroaching onto the western slopes of the hills. Little is known at present of the ordinary settlements associated with the hillforts, but presumably they would have been densely concentrated along the fertile valley bottom, but now buried or obliterated by later activity.

The cave was excavated by Dr Henry Hicks in 1897. He unearthed the bones of 16 different species of animal, including mammoth, woolly rhinoceros, hyena, elk, wolf and cave lion. One of the flint tools unearthed in the cave was later carbon dated to 38,000 B.C. The bones and flint tools are now housed in the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff and the cave is a protected site.

A mammoth bone dated to 16,000 BC has been found. Tools have been dated to around 36,000 BC, and also between 28 - 26,000 BC. One assumes that the cave has been linked as a hermitage for the early mediaeval St Beuno by the attribution of his name.

The house dates to around 1560 and was once inhabited by H M Stanley, the famous explorer. The holy well is said to have been built in the 6th century.



The well © Maria Blagojevic

Staff from the British Museum and University of Manchester are currently revisiting the spoil heaps left by Boyd Dawkins, who famously dug at Creswell Caves in Derbyshire and have already found some fascinating finds including microliths – tiny pieces of flint, mammoth and hyena teeth. .

