

Research design: Llantwit Major 2026 season

(GeoArch Report 2026/05)



The Globe Field near the end of the 2025 season: the excavation location lies to the south of the Parish Church of St Illtud, close to the centre of what is believed to be the early medieval monastic enclosure. The medieval well is in the foreground.

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Summary

Llantwit Major has long been believed to be the site of a monastery associated with St Illtud in the late 5th and early 6th centuries and which became a royal burial ground in the 8th – 10th centuries (the Parish Church houses a remarkable collection of early medieval inscribed stones). The site seems to have waned in importance during the 10th and 11th centuries and was granted to Tewkesbury Abbey around the beginning of the 12th century by Robert Fitzhamon.

The archaeology department of Cardiff University, funded by the Dr D.G. Smith Memorial Project, is conducting work to place the interpretation of the monastery on a sounder footing by seeking the physical evidence that has previously been lacking. This work was initially desk-based and geophysical, but excavations were undertaken in 2022 at a related secular site in Boverton and from 2023 in 'The Globe Field' in the heart of Llantwit.

A model for the monastic enclosure was developed, employing an approach fostered in the historical town surveys of Ireland (Swan 1971, 1985, 1994; Prunty & Clarke 2011), in which the earthworks in the 'Great Ley' (commonly known as 'the Dovecote Field') may be a part of the early medieval monastic enclosure, rather than simply fields associated with the medieval Rectory (often referred to as the Grange). This substantial potential enclosure would be commensurate with other significant early medieval monastic sites, and measures 500m N-S and 300m E-W (10.8ha), with the inner enclosure (70m by 60m) around the church lying somewhat asymmetrically within its northern part. Surviving features within this enclosure, including the internal 'fields' at the rectory site and the churchyard, together with long-lived property boundaries in the village, suggest elements of its subdivision.

The summer 2023 field season started the testing of this model by examining the remains of drystone field walls that appear, in plan, to be part of this system of internal sub-division. It was shown these walls date from the early to mid-12th century. They probably relate to a broader phase of refurbishment or re-imagining of Llantwit, that included construction of the Norman church and the writing of the surviving 'Life' of St Illtud. Whether the outer enclosure is of the same date remains unknown. The 2023 season in 'The Globe Field', more significantly, also produced evidence for four phases of activity before construction of the drystone walls.

Further work in 2024 and 2025 has expanded on the initial season. Medieval activity of the 12th-14th centuries has been shown to be more intensive than initially believed. The stone walls are associated in the north with a probable barrel latrine, two soakaways and evidence for horticultural activities, while in the south of the field medieval quarrying followed construction of a well. The early medieval activity is also proving complex, with a corn drying kiln of late 6th or early 7th century date, followed by metalworking of late 7th century date. This was followed in one area by inhumation burials, initially of young children, but later also an adult, of late 8th-9th century age. The southern margin of the main trench shows a scatter of adult inhumations from the mid-7th to mid-9th century date. The site appears to have been abandoned through the 10th and 11th centuries, prior to the Norman reinvention.

As with the previous seasons, the 2026 excavations will be delivered as part of the university's teaching programme, involving a core group of undergraduates, with additional graduate and local volunteers, managed by Dr Tim Young.

Administrative background

A programme of research, funded by the Dr D.G. Smith Memorial Project, is being undertaken by the archaeology department of Cardiff University to attempt to clarify the nature and location of early medieval activity in Llantwit Major (Young 2018, 2019a, 2019b, 2020a, 2020b, 2021a, 2021b, 2022, 2023a, 2023b, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c, 2025, 2026). The research has involved geophysical survey, together with an analysis of patterns of landholding from medieval and early post-medieval documentary sources and is moving into some focused excavation of key localities, starting with Boverton (December 2022; Young 2023b) and The Globe Field, Llantwit (August-September 2023, Young 2023a, 2024a; May-June 2024, Young 2024b, 2024c; May-June 2025, Young 2025, 2026).

This document provides an updated Research Design for a third season of work at 'The Globe Field', with the excavation planned for the period 18th May 2026 – 12th June 2026. Further details of the programme of work and its rationale are present with the Research Design documents for the previous seasons (Young 2023a, 2024a, 2025) and this document is intended to be read alongside them. As with the previous seasons, the excavation will be run as a training excavation for Cardiff University.

Archaeological and historical background

The church of Llantwit Major has long been associated with the site of the monastery of Illtud (see Wooding 2017, 142-147 for a recent discussion of the identification). Illtud (Eltutus) was described in the *Vita Prima Samsonis* (probably dated to the last decades of the seventh century or the first of the eighth; Wooding 2107, 140) as a classical, not just religious, teacher. The detail provided in this 'Life', coupled with independent evidence for the presence at Samson at the Council of Paris AD556x573 (arguably AD561; Wood 2017, 103) enhances the credibility of a historical Illtud. Samson's biographer claimed to have visited Illtud's monastery, presumably at some point in the late-7th century, describing it as magnificent. The list of Abbots of Illtud derived the charters in the Book of Llandaff (Davies 1979) extends from the late 7th century, often with reference to *Abbas Lannildut* or its Latin translation to *Podum Ilduti*, and the development of a royal burial ground and cult centre at Llantwit Major by the mid-8th century suggests that the site has been continuously identified as that of Illtud's monastery since the visit Samson's biographer in the late 7th century. The likely date of the visit by Samson's biographer would fall within Phase 2 of the current scheme.

A model for the monastic enclosure has been developed (Young 2023a), employing an approach fostered in the historical town surveys of Ireland (Swan 1971, 1985, 1994; Prunty & Clarke 2011), in which the earthworks in the 'Great Ley' (commonly known as 'the Dovecote Field') may be a part of the early medieval monastic enclosure, rather than simply fields associated with the medieval Rectory (often referred to as the Grange). This substantial potential enclosure would be commensurate with significant early medieval monastic sites in Ireland and Scotland, and measures 500m N-S and 300m E-W (10.8ha), with the inner enclosure (70m by 60m) around the church lying somewhat asymmetrically within its northern part. Surviving features within this enclosure, including the internal 'fields' at the rectory site and the churchyard, together with long-lived property boundaries in the village, suggest elements of its subdivision. Such a rectilinear system of subdivision has not been noted at examples of early medieval monasteries in Ireland or Scotland.

The summer 2023 field season started the testing of the enclosure model by examining the remains of drystone field walls in 'The Globe Field' 40-50m S of the modern churchyard, that appear, in plan, to be part of this same system of internal sub-division. These walls probably date from the early to

mid-12th century (excavation Phase 6) and had passed out of use by the late 13th or early 14th century (excavation Phase 8).

This unexpected outcome suggests that the sub-division of the enclosure may relate to a broader phase of refurbishment of Llantwit, including the Norman church and perhaps to the writing of the 'Life' of St Illtud, probably in the period immediately following the Norman. Moreover, the 2023 excavations suggest that the 'The Globe Field' area had previously suffered livestock trampling and erosion in the 10th - 11th centuries (i.e. excavation Phase 4). This broadly corresponds to the period during which Llantwit is absent from the documentary record (although the carved stone pillars interpreted as perhaps supporting the screen in a wooden church, are of this period). This suggests a period of abandonment of the monastery until its revival in the 12th century, probably as part of the rise of the Diocese of Llandaff.

The inscribed stones of the 8th-9th centuries form the tangible evidence for the earlier heyday of the cult centre. At least one of the stones has a reasonable provenance, for the Samson (or Illtud) Cross was moved with some archaeological observation in the early 20th century which suggested it had been *in situ* and associated with a cist burial (and post-dating even earlier burials; Halliday 1903). The 8th-9th century high status burial ground was thus reasonably certainly on the site of the modern church.

The recent work has demonstrated, however, a much wider extent of inhumation across both sides of the valley south of the church (Figure 1). To the west of the stream, human remains from the badger sett at Chantry House (95m S of the churchyard) have an MNI of 4, with two individuals dated to the period AD660 to 780. Further south, Testpit 2 of 2023 (130m S of the churchyard), produced the reworked remains for two further individuals (dated to AD650 to 780). These burials thus all fall into excavation Phase 2. To the east of the stream in the Globe Field, one adult belongs in Phase 1 or 2, one adult and one infant to Phase 2 and probably 10 infants and two adults to Phase 3. Thus, the burials in the Globe Field include the oldest burial currently known (SK25.1; cal. AD 600-680), plus examples spanning most of the date range of the high status monuments at the church (Figures 3-5).

Many other pieces of disarticulated human remains were recovered from the cultivation soils in Trench 1/4, suggesting derivation from upslope. In that direction, undated inhumations were also reported from The Hayes Croft at some point before 1886 (Anon 1887; The Western Mail, 6th January 1886).

Although the dataset is currently very small, these findings suggest that in the late 7th-9th century heyday of the cult centre, burials took place across a wide area (at least 150m across) of the central part of the proposed monastic enclosure, yet (if the evidence for the dating of the drystone walls is also applicable to the churchyard enclosure), much of this area was excluded when the churchyard was enclosed in the 11th or 12th century, after the 10th-11th century hiatus in activity. This is another piece of circumstantial evidence for loss of memory of the monastery between the 9th and 11th centuries.



Figure 2: aerial view of Trench 4/1 at the end of the 2025 season

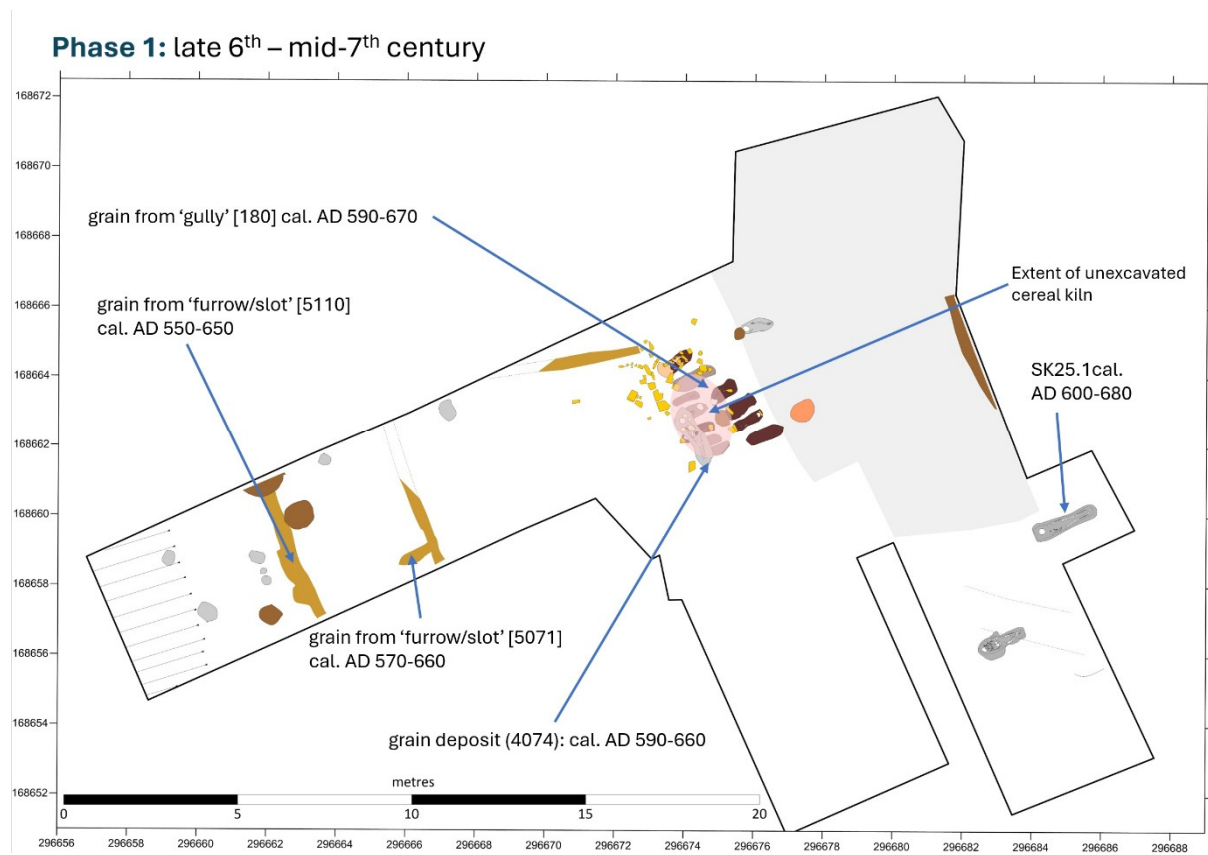


Figure 3: all early medieval features with 14C determinations relating to Phase 1

Phase 2: late 7th – mid-8th century

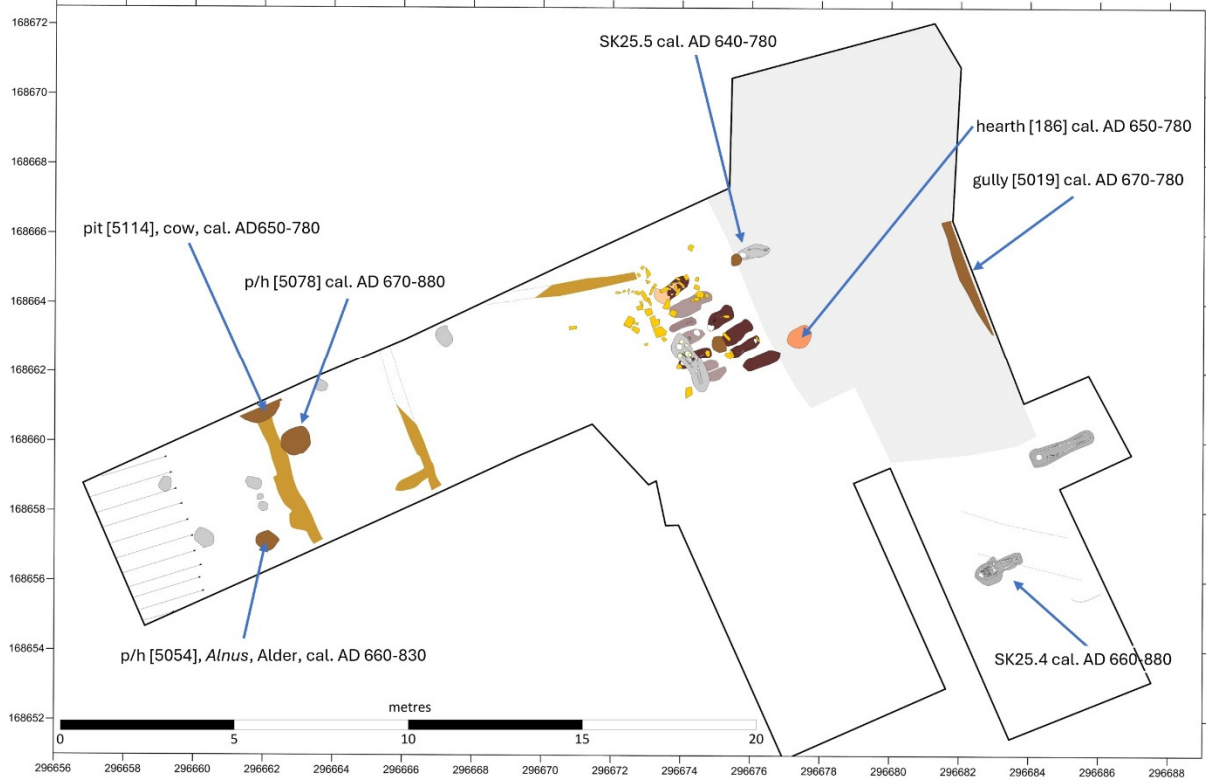


Figure 4: all early medieval features with 14C determinations relating to Phase 2

Phase 3: Late 8th- mid-9th century

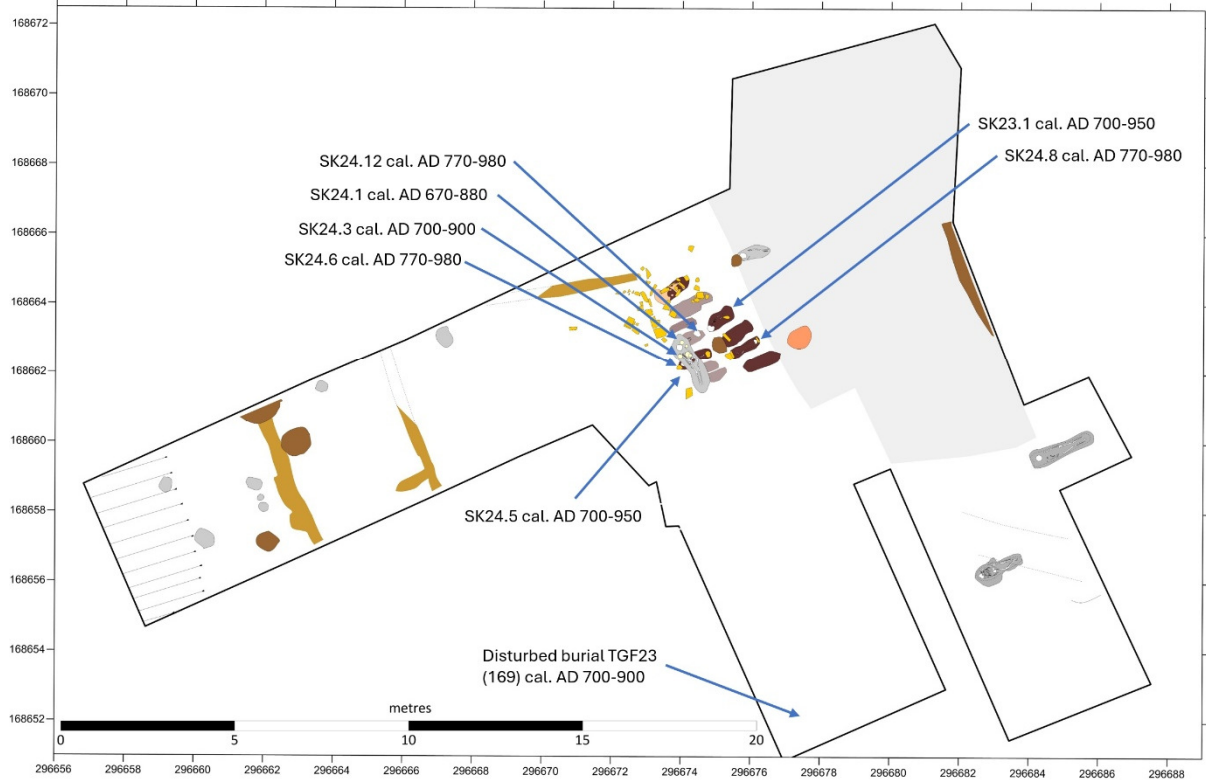


Figure 5: all early medieval features with 14C determinations relating to Phase 3



Figure 6: all medieval features

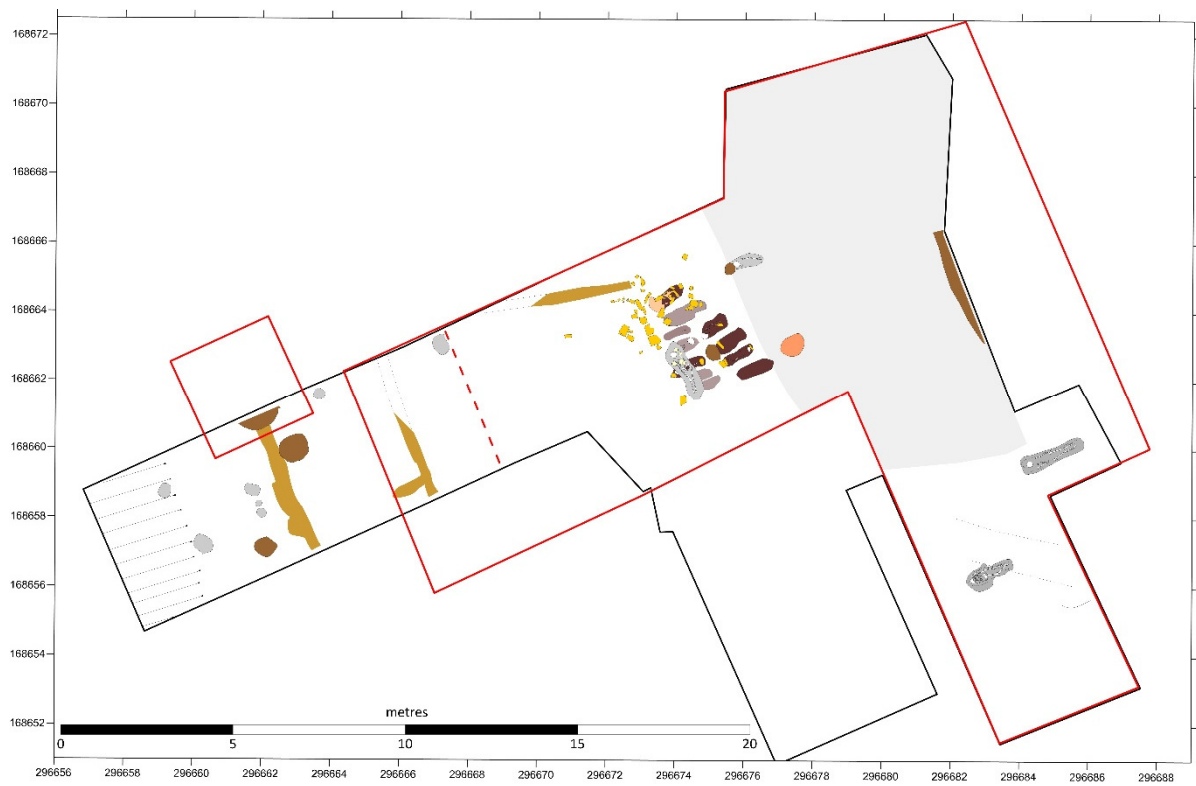


Figure 7: all early medieval features with, in red, the planned extent of trenches for the 2026 season

Planned fieldwork

The fieldwork to be undertaken in 2026 aims to complete the 'L'-shaped excavation (Trench 4) started in 2024, that in part wraps around the trench (Trench 1) excavated in 2023. The 2026 work in Trench 4 will thus involve reopening the trench with some small extensions (Figure 7). The specific goals in the existing trench footprint include:

- clarifying the nature the nature of the Phase 1 occupation,
- clarifying the remains of the Phase 2 workshop,
- completion of the excavation of the Phase 3 infant cemetery,
- the investigation of the focus of the infant cemetery,
- locating any further inhumations,
- the continued excavation of the Phase 4 stone-filled feature in the SE

The extensions will permit:

- the investigation of the possible metalworking structure in the E of the site,
- the determination of the relationship between the slots/furrows in the west of the site with the medieval wall and with the Phase 2 stone-filled pit with a partial articulated cow skeleton in the top
- the determination of the relationship between the EW and NW slots/furrows

Methodology

1. The excavations will be undertaken by members of Cardiff University, together with volunteers, with appropriate levels of supervision from suitably experienced supervisors.
2. The topsoil will be removed from both the trenches by machine, but all underlying deposits will be hand-dug.
3. All discrete features to be defined and planned. All discrete cut features to be half-sectioned, as a minimum, and recorded.
4. All linear cut features to be defined, planned and a minimum of 50% excavated; sections to be recorded. All drawings and plans to be recorded at scales appropriate for purpose (1:10, 1:20).
5. Built features will be defined, planned and sectioned where appropriate.
6. A full digital photographic archive of the work required will be maintained, with photographs of at least 16MP.
7. A vertical digital photographic archive will be maintained, with a minimum of 27MP, subject to appropriate weather conditions for drone use.
8. All planning and height data will be tied-in directly to National Grid using high-resolution RTK GPS within the main site and indirectly to National Grid using an EDM for the test-pits where tree cover precludes the use of GPS directly.
9. Any articulated human remains encountered will be fully recorded in situ and specific remains may be lifted under license and placed in the registered repository in Cardiff University for further research under the aims and objectives as outlined above.
10. Any finds will be retained, cleaned, catalogued and stored under the supervision of a qualified conservator, in accordance with standards set in the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists' Standard and guidance for the collection, documentation, conservation and research of archaeological materials (2014).
11. Finds recovered that are regarded as Treasure under The Treasure Act (1996) will be reported to HM Coroner for the local area.
12. The fills of all potentially early features will be sampled, since the recognition of early medieval contexts is likely to be entirely by means of scientific dating.

13. Deposits with a significant potential for the preservation of palaeoenvironmental material will be sampled. Should significant potential be established for enhancement of understanding of the site through palaeoenvironmental work, the advice will be sought of a specialist environmental archaeologist. All environmental sampling and recording will follow English Heritage's Guidelines for Environmental Archaeology (2011).
14. Specialist input on any finds arising from the works will be provided by specialist colleagues from Cardiff University and NMW as required.
15. All excavations will be made secure using Heras fencing (or equivalent) outside working hours. Importantly, the excavations must be left at night with a means of escape, should a badger (or other mammal) fall into them.
16. The site archive (excluding human remains) will be housed in the first instance at the offices of GeoArch.
17. Large volumes of metallurgical waste are expected. These may be 'power-washed' on site, sorted, quantified, and then reburied, with only selected materials being retained.

References

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<https://www.geoarch.co.uk/report-library/>

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A translation of the *Vita Prima Samsonis* may be found at:

<https://archive.org/details/lifeofstsamsonof00sams>

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