# Research design: Llantwit Major summer 2023

## (GeoArch Report 2023/16)

*The Globe Field: the excavation location lies towards the bottom of the grassy slope. On the right is the Parish Church of St Illtud, in the centre distance the 13th century gatehouse to the Rectory of Tewkesbury Abbey, with Chantry house in the valley bottom.*

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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 had achieved prominence and the status of a royal burial ground in the 8th – 10th centuries (the Parish Church houses a remarkable collection of early medieval inscribed stones and there are many references to the Abbot of Illtud (*abbas Illduti*) in the Book of Llandaff from the early 8th to early 10th centuries). The church 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.

In contrast to the evidence for the status of the site, no hard evidence for the physical nature and location of the monastery has been recognised previously. A programme of research with this aim, initially desk-based and geophysical, but increasingly involving excavation, is being undertaken by the archaeology department of Cardiff University, funded by the Dr D.G. Smith Memorial Project. Geophysical survey has suggested that the earthworks in the 'Great Ley' (commonly known as 'the Dovecote Field) may actually be a part of the early medieval monastic enclosure, rather than simply fields associated with the medieval Rectory (often referred to as the Grange). Moreover, a review of the urban topography of Llantwit, employing an approach fostered in the historical town surveys of Ireland (Swan 1971, 1985, 1994; Prunty & Clarke 2011), allows the tentative identification of a substantial outer enclosure commensurate with other significant early medieval monastic sites, of which the visible earthworks in the Great Ley form a small visible surviving component. This would have measured 500m N-S and 300m E-W (10.8ha), with an inner enclosure (70m by 60m) around the church lying somewhat asymmetrically within its northern part. Surviving features within the enclosure, together with long-lived property boundaries suggest elements of its subdivision.

The summer 2023 field season aims (1) to start the testing of this model for the early medieval monastic centre and (2) to develop understanding of the nature and date of the cemetery that appears to exist of the western side of the valley to the south of the church. Rather than, in the first instance, re-examining the features in the scheduled area, this first field season will target features within the core of the site through two parallel pieces of work:

1. A main, 'L'-shaped, excavation in the northern part of 'The globe field' with the dual objectives of testing a geophysical anomaly (potentially a bank forming a subdivision of the enclosure) running southwards across the field from the direction of the eastern boundary of the churchyard and secondly assessing the archaeological potential of the ground between that anomaly and the stream to the west.
2. A series of three test-pits on the western side of the valley with the objective of testing the extent of a potential inhumation cemetery, evidenced by recent discovered of at least two inhumations dating to the period AD660-780 in the grounds of Chantry House, together with establishing the nature and date of any burials located and their potential for future research.

The 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.

## 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 teacher, not just a religious teacher. The level of 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 for a historical Illtud. Samson's biographer claimed to have visited Illtud's monastery, presumably at some point in the late-7th century and described it as magnificent. The development of a royal burial ground and probably a cult centre at Llantwit Major by the mid-8th century suggests that if the site was identified as that of Illtud's monastery at that time, then it would likely be the same as the site identified as Illtud's when Samson's biographer visited in the late 7th century. This provides reasonable confidence in the identification of Llantwit Major as that of Illtud's monastery since the gaps in the chain of identification are relatively short.

The inscribed stones of the 8th-9th centuries form the tangible evidence for heyday of the cult centre, although they are also supplemented by contemporary references to the Abbot of Llantwit (*abbas Ilduti*) as a witness for charters in the Book of Llandaff (where the place appears as *Lanildut* or *Podum sancti Ilduti*). 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.

Recently, human remains (discussed in more detail below) dated to between AD660 and AD780 have been recovered from a badger sett approximately 120m south of the church, suggesting that the modern graveyard area may not have been the only cemetery at that period.

A programme of research by the archaeology department of Cardiff University, funded by the Dr D.G. Smith Memorial Project, is being undertaken to attempt to clarify the nature and location of early medieval activity in Llantwit Major (Young 2018, 2019a, 2019b, 2020a, 2020b, 2021a, 2021b, 2022). 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.

## A model for the early medieval monastic enclosure

Geophysical survey of the area commonly referred to as Llantwit Grange (NPRN 307122; scheduled monument GM142 'Llantwit Major Monastic Settlement'; MG48 'The Grange of Abbot's Llantwit', RCAHMW 1982, 299-303) produced results that suggested (Young 2021a) that the earthwork features of the complex predate the medieval buildings (probably of the mid-13th century, see below) and were potentially of early medieval age.

The most noticeable aspect of the plan of the enclosures is the sinuous nature of the western boundary bank, which more closely reflects the line of the Ogney Brook than it does the closer break of slope above the stream. A second striking feature is that the E-W bounds of the enclosure division north of Church Lane are broadly confluent with the limits of the churchyard. The square churchyard with a bank and external ditch is described in the 'Life' of Illtud dating to approximately

*Figure 1: proposed interpretation of the monastic enclosure, showing excavation areas.*

1120. These two observations suggest that the enclosure system extended to the stream and, at least in the area of the church, beyond it. It also provides some circumstantial evidence that the enclosure system predates 1120. If the enclosure system is pre-1120, then it is likely to be pre-Norman, for it has been argued that the management of the estate probably didn't require a rectory prior to the later 13th-century. If pre-Norman, then the period of the 9th to 11th century *clas* church would seem less likely a context for the creation of the enclosures than the pre-9th century monastery.

There is no clear model for what form a significant early medieval monastery might take in Wales. That their inner enclosures might be related to extant curvilinear churchyards has been proposed, but there is no firm expectation of the morphology of the broader site. In Scotland and Ireland, the model of concentric division is well established (with variants for coastal and other asymmetric locations). Could such a model be applicable to Llantwit? Rather than seeing the surviving enclosures as the western part of complex and the church as the eastern, could the rectory enclosures be part of the outer zone of a more symmetrical site? In other words, should the sinuous, almost stream parallel, boundary to the rectory enclosures be paralleled by a similar boundary to the east of the church? Such a view of the enclosure system would place the eastern boundary within the modern town.

The approach of Leo Swan (1971, 1985, 1994; and developed during the Irish Historic towns Atlas project, Prunty & Clarke 2011) for investigating the former bounds of monastic enclosures in Ireland has emphasised the survival of roads along the boundary lines. At Llantwit, the existence of a track along the outside of the western boundary bank has already been noted. The present road system in the town preserves a sinuous course, approximately parallel to the stream, that would be a contender for such a line. This course passes from the Swine Bridge, along Wine Street, the top of Church Street and into Colhuw Street, that duplicates the course of the bank on the west side. Swan's work also emphasised the common location of a cross and marketplace adjacent to the eastern entrance to the monastic enclosure and the line just described passes the former medieval cross (now a war memorial) in the triangular space ('The Square') between The White Hart, the Old Swan Inn and the Tudor Tavern. Swift (1998) amongst others has commented on the location of the law courts just inside the entrance to monastic enclosures in Ireland and it may be more than coincidence that early post-medieval town hall (presumed to be on the site of its medieval precursor, RCAHMW 1982) at Llantwit lies in that location. The closure of this potential boundary to the south might lie along the line of Flanders Road and the approach track to Flanders Farm. To the north, the closure has a less obvious solution. The line of Westhill Street and West Street to the north of Plymouth House is a logical westward continuation from Swine Bridge. This line could continue to the merger with College Street or return more directly southwards to the western margin of the Rectory.

Viewing the topographic situation at Llantwit through the lens of how such evidence has been used in Ireland, presents a reasonably compelling argument for a substantial monastic enclosure at Llantwit. This would have been 580m NNW-SSE by 300m wide (its asymmetry imposed by the nature of the focus on a linear valley) and covering an area of 10.8 ha.

Several land divisions within this putative enclosure may be interpretable as having an early origin. Firstly, there are several roads that are likely to be on early lines: College Street (referred to as a highway in a fifteenth century grant), Church Street, The Lanes and perhaps the roads flanking the churchyard (College Gardens and Burial Lane), while Methodist Lane is aligned on a prominent bank to the west of the valley. Other significant land boundaries that might be early include the NW and SE boundaries of the former glebe land containing (amongst others) the Old School, and the northern boundary of the Hayes.

These potential subdivisions allow a reconstruction of the outer enclosure as having been divided on a very similar scale to the preserved section of enclosures close to the rectory. In the Great Ley.

## Grange or Rectory?

The complex of buildings (NPRN 307122 'Llantwit Grange') that stood close to Church Lane to the west of the church comprises elements that still survive, including the gatehouse (SM GM141; NPRN 307455), parts of the tithe barn (NPRN 37592) and the dovecote (SM GM140; NPRN 37592), together with a larger number of buildings with buried remains. These buried remains were investigated by Rodger (in 1912-1914; Rodger 1913, 1915) and by Nash-Williams (in 1937; published 1952). The complex, together with the adjacent earthworks, forms Scheduled Monument GM142 'Llantwit Major Monastic Settlement'. The complex was described as MG48 'The Grange of Abbot's Llantwit' by the RCAHMW (1982, 299-303). Nash-Williams (1952, 324) was clearly in little doubt about the identification of the site as a grange of Tewkesbury Abbey. He quoted Place Farm, Tisbury 'a grange of the abbesses of Shaftesbury' as an example of a 'grange-site in the adjacent region of England, whence the type was evidently introduced'. However, both the Llantwit site and Place Farm were the properties of Benedictine institutions and were thus not granges in the normal sense of the term. Place Farm (Dufty 1947) was later described by Freeman & Stevenson (1987) as 'large and elaborate buildings for residence, worship, agriculture, and collecting tithes'. A similar interpretation, although with less emphasis on residence and worship, can be applied to Llantwit. Tewkesbury Abbey (as had Shaftesbury Abbey at Tisbury) had been granted the tithe of Llantwit and so had the role of 'rector'. The 1449-50 accounts (Rees 1950). refer to the location as 'the site of the rectory' and rectory appears a much more appropriate label for these locations for tithe-collection than grange.

## Previous excavations of the proposed early medieval monastic enclosure bank

During the 1912-14 excavations, a section was cut across the western bank of the complex in the so-called 'Monastery Field' and revealed a wall of at least 0.6m thickness apparently forming a revetment to the bank. Nash Williams excavated two further sections across the 'western embankment' in this field, at 4.6m and 34.7m from the S corner of the field. These were not described in detail in his report, but apparently showed that the wall (which he interpreted as the enceinte of the grange) was 0.7m thick, acted as a revetment for the bank and fronted a shallow ditch. The bank produced only a large iron staple and the ditch contained a range of pottery of medieval and post-medieval date.

Nash Williams also excavated two, better described and illustrated, sections across earthworks in the 'Palace Field' further north: Section EF across the 'western embankment' and section AB across the sub-dividing bank north of the so-called Monastery Field.

Section EF was cut to the SW of the 'Long Narrow Building (Rooms 2-3)'. Nash Williams interpreted the section as showing a slight 'counterscarp' bank 3.4m wide and 0.5m high, a 5.2m-wide shallow ditch or platform, a revetment wall 0.9m thick and surviving to 0.8m. and an inner bank to 0.8m in height and 3m wide. The published section suggests that the 'ditch' had its base less than 0.4m below the level of the natural beneath the adjacent banks. The wall was constructed of dry rubble faced on the outside, but only doubtfully so on the inside. The inner bank had a lower level of loam and an upper of rubble. The only datable find was a probable 13th century pitcher or jug handle from the 'ditch'.

Section AB showed that the bank between the fields was 0.8m high and at least 3.7m broad, formed of 'mixed loam and occupation-soil', with some 'fallen debris' in front. It was described as 'less of a boundary work than a made up terrace', but the section only extended to the modern boundary wall

(for which a foundation trench was incised into the top of the bank). Dating evidence included pottery of 12th or 13th century age from the bank and a probable 12th century lid from the area to the north of the bank. The 'fallen debris' yielded a fragment of ridge tile attributed to the 16th century.

To the south of Church Lane, the sinuous western boundary bank continuous southwards across the Great Ley and has three associated cross banks, defining small fields between the western bank and the break of slope above the Ogney valley. None of these features has been investigated archaeologically.

## The Chantry house burials

In the spring of 2022 human bones were recognised in the spoil from the entrances to a badger sett to the south of Chantry house (approximately NGR [296656, 168609]). After initial investigation by South Wales Police, the university took on the study of the remains. At least two individuals were identified in the assemblage: a juvenile approximately 15-18 years old and an adult female approximately 35-45 years old both suffering from osteological conditions (Brown 2022).

Samples were taken from these two individuals, from an unfused tibia (UBA-48628) and from a fused tibia (UBA-48629) respectively for dating. UBA-48628 returned a radiocarbon age of 1271+/-25 and UBA-48629 an age of 1305+/-26. These dates calibrate to 2 sigma ranges of AD668-775 (0.944)/AD790-804 (0.032)/ AD810-821 (0.024) and to AD659-708 (0.482)/AD714-716 (0.003)/AD721-774 (0.5515) respectively. It is thus extremely likely that both individuals date to within the period AD660-AD780. In other words, both individuals probably lived within the century prior to the erection of the oldest of the inscribed stones preserved in the church and within the same century that the author of the *Vita Prima Samsonis* visited Illtud's 'magnificent monastery'.

In the spring of 2023, a further large assemblage of human bone was ejected from the sett during the badgers' annual 'spring-clean' and expansion. These are currently housed, with the first group, in the Archaeology Department, Cardiff University, awaiting osteological examination. It is not yet known whether they represent additional individuals or more bones from same two.

## The Globe Field: geophysical survey 2022

Magnetic gradiometry and ground resistivity were conducted within the 'Globe Field' (centred on [296685, 168650]) in March and April 2022 (Young 2022). The field is named for its long standing as part of a land-holding associated with the Globe Inn.

The field has been heavily disturbed, particularly towards the north-eastern corner, where dumping has been employed to create a flat working area in front of two rows of now-demolished sheds and garages. The field has been less disturbed towards the west and south, although some dumping appears to extend southwards close to the NE bounding wall and a dump of building waste also extends along the southeast boundary (infilling a former narrow lane to the stream). The field is currently encroached upon by the growth of brambles (particularly from the north) and there has been some recent tree-planting in the northwest.

The magnetometry survey was conducted across the whole of the accessible area of the field; the ground resistivity survey was focused on the areas outside the recent dumping.

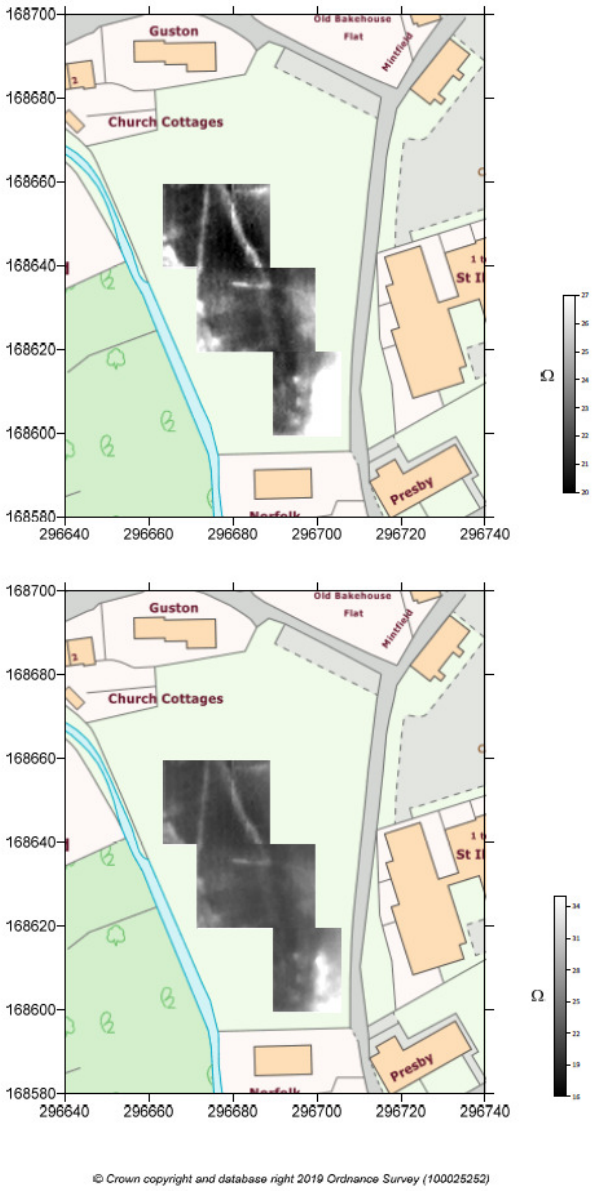


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*Figure 2: ground resistivity survey (0.5m spaced mobile probes) within The Globe Field. The excavation will focus on the northern part of the surveyed area. Three higher resistivity (bright) anomalies intersect here. The NE-SW anomaly is probably associated with 20th century horticulture and the almost N-S anomaly is a field boundary marked on the Tithe Map of 1840. The NNW-SSE anomaly is of particular interest.*

The results include several linear anomalies associated with previous subdivisions of the field with two perpendicular walls at an oblique angle to the boundaries (a situation indicated on the Tithe Map of c.1840). They also include more subtle anomalies that are indicative of former elongate cultivation plots perpendicular to the stream (possibly corresponding to those visible on mid-20th century photographs).

A significant linear anomaly (positive resistivity anomaly 2m-3m wide with a narrower negative magnetic anomaly) along the NNW-SSE axis of the field, almost parallel to the stream, might be

interpretable as a path or stony bank. This anomaly is in alignment with the eastern boundary of the churchyard and may thus be an associated early land boundary.

## Planned fieldwork

The fieldwork to be undertaken in the summer of 2023 aims to further understanding of the early medieval monastic centre trough two parallel pieces of work:

### *The main excavation*

A main, 'L'-shaped, excavation will be conducted in the northern part of 'The Globe Field' with the dual objectives of testing a geophysical anomaly running southwards across the field from the direction of the eastern boundary of the churchyard and secondly assessing the archaeological potential of the ground between that anomaly and the stream to the west.

The trench will be positioned so that it will cover the area of intersection of a N-S post-medieval land boundary present on the 1840 Tithe Map and imaged by the geophysics, with the NW-SE anomaly that appears to predate it.

The NW-SE arm of the trench (5m x 15m) will be positioned over a length of the NW-SE geophysical anomaly to maximise the potential for its interpretation. The NE-SW arm of the trench (2m x 15m) will extend westwards from the N end of the NW-SE arm towards the stream, enabling the investigation of almost the entire width of the land enclosed between the geophysical feature and the stream. The trench will be positioned as far to the north in the field as possible (within the limitations of vegetation and an old building plinth), so that it is as close to the church as practical.

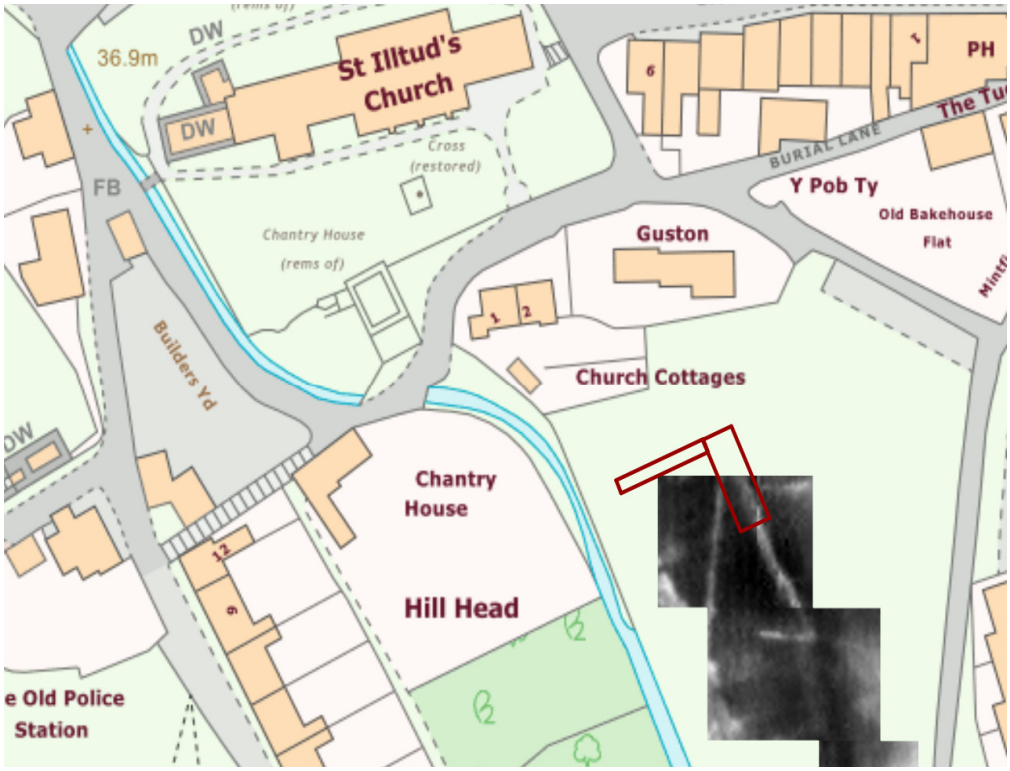


*Figure 3: planned location for the main trench in The Globe Field in relation to the geophysical anomalies*

### *Test-pits*

A series of three entirely hand-dug test-pits (each 2m square, but which may be extended to encompass any inhumations encountered) will be dug on the western side of the valley. The most northerly of these will be site as close as permitted to the badger sett that lies in the grounds of Chantry House, to look for any southwards continuation of the inhumations evidenced by badger activity (see above). The closest permissible location actually lies outside the Chantry House property to the south. It will lie at approximately NGR [296657, 168557], approximately 40m from the nearest sett entrance.

The second will lie to the south of a major earthwork field boundary (at approximately NGR [296662, 168535]}, again to examine whether inhumations extend past that boundary. This extant boundary is a substantial bank likely to have an early origin.

The third will lie slightly further south again, at the probable locality of a rock-cut pit or grave (approximately NGR [296642, 168495]), where in the 19th century was discovered an unusual piece of metalwork, again from an area in which the finds of skulls had been claimed (Anon. 1872). The find of this metalwork was in a pit or grave (PRN 00456s) described as being 200 yards S of Llantwit Church (and hence given a rather literal map reference of SS 96636854 by GGAT). The account given by Dr J.W. Nicholl Carne to the RAI on the instance of the display of the object was that it had been found in a rock-cut pit found during levelling for construction of a building by one of Nicholl Carne's tenants. Nichol Carne inherited Dimlands in 1849 on the death of his father (Rev. Robert Nicholl). He had acquired St Donats Castle (where the object was spotted during the RAI visit of 1871) in 1861. Thus, it seems likely that the object was recovered between 1860 and 1871. There is no available list of Nicholl Carne's tenants, but likely properties can be identified from those held by his father in 1840, at the time of the Tithe Survey. There were two is the relevant area of Llantwit:

#543, a garden held by Catherine Price (centred on NGR [296647, 168496]
#965, a cottage held by Catherine Price, now Lane Cottage (centred on NGR [296720, 168496])

The cottage now known as Lane Cottage lies 240m (262 yards) SSE of the church porch, or 217m (237 yards) SSE of the nearest point on the churchyard wall; the garden lies 210m (230 yards) S of the church porch, or186m (203 yards) from the nearest point on the churchyard wall. The garden is not shown as containing any structure on the Tithe Map of 1840, or any pre-1980s OS mapping, but does contain a now derelict structure of uncertain age. It seems most likely that the garden (#543) is the site referred to, and potentially the structure now present (a pig stye?) was that constructed in the 1860s.

### *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 the main trench by machine with a toothless grading bucket under archaeological supervision.
3. The test pits will be entirely hand-dug to avoid disturbance to the badgers.
4. All discrete features to be defined and planned. All discrete cut features to be half-sectioned, as a minimum, and recorded.
5. 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).
6. Built features will be defined, planned and sectioned where appropriate.

7. A full digital photographic archive of the work required will be maintained, with photographs of at least 16MP.
8. A vertical digital photographic archive will be maintained, with a minimum of 27MP, subject to appropriate weather conditions for drone use.
9. 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.
10. 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.
11. 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).
12. Finds recovered that are regarded as Treasure under The Treasure Act (1996) will be reported to HM Coroner for the local area.
13. 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.
14. 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).
15. Specialist input on any finds arising from the works will be provided by specialist colleagues from Cardiff University and NMW as required.
16. 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.

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27/5/23

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

https://archive.org/details/lifeofstsamsonof00sams