

## A STONE ALIGNMENT AT BANCMBRYN, MYNYDD Y BETWS, CARMARTHENSHIRE

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### Abstract

In January 2012 a previously unrecorded alignment of stones was identified on the southern slope of Bancmbryn, Carmarthenshire. Subsequent research has indicated that this stone alignment shares common characteristics with examples in South West England and sits firmly within an area previously identified as containing a significant number of prehistoric cairns. A scheduling assessment conducted by Cadw has concluded that there is insufficient evidence to support a prehistoric interpretation. This paper seeks to re-examine the evidence and utilise it to present a persuasive interpretation supporting a prehistoric explanation for this alignment.

### Introduction

Bancmbryn is a pronounced bolster shaped hill forming part of an area of upland known as Mynydd y Betws. The hill stands 1.7km west of Cwmgors , 2.5km south of Garnant and reaches an altitude of 324m at NGR SN 68672 10278. There are extensive views northwards towards the mountains of the Brecon Beacons from the summit although the outlook south and westwards is restricted by a number of substantial hills including Bryn Mawr, Tor Clawdd and Mynydd y Gwair. The local vegetation includes a mosaic of heather and molinia which are grazed and periodically burnt. The most recent fire to have occurred before the discovery of the feature was in 2011. During a walk in early 2012 a line of stones was identified on the southern slope of the hill in the area between two known and scheduled cairn cemeteries (CM333 and CM335). A further nearby platform cairn is scheduled as a separate monument (CM334). Visually the line of stones looked like a prehistoric stone alignment comparable in character to those known from the South West of England. A request for the alignment to be assessed for protection as a scheduled ancient monument was submitted to Cadw in January 2012. In August 2013 Cadw produced a report that concluded that there was insufficient evidence to support a prehistoric identification although no alternative explanations were offered. This article will seek to move the debate forward by assessing the monument using third party detailed criteria employed successfully elsewhere for this purpose.



*The north western slope of Bancmbryn. View from the west.*



*The southern slope of Bancmbryn. View from the south.*



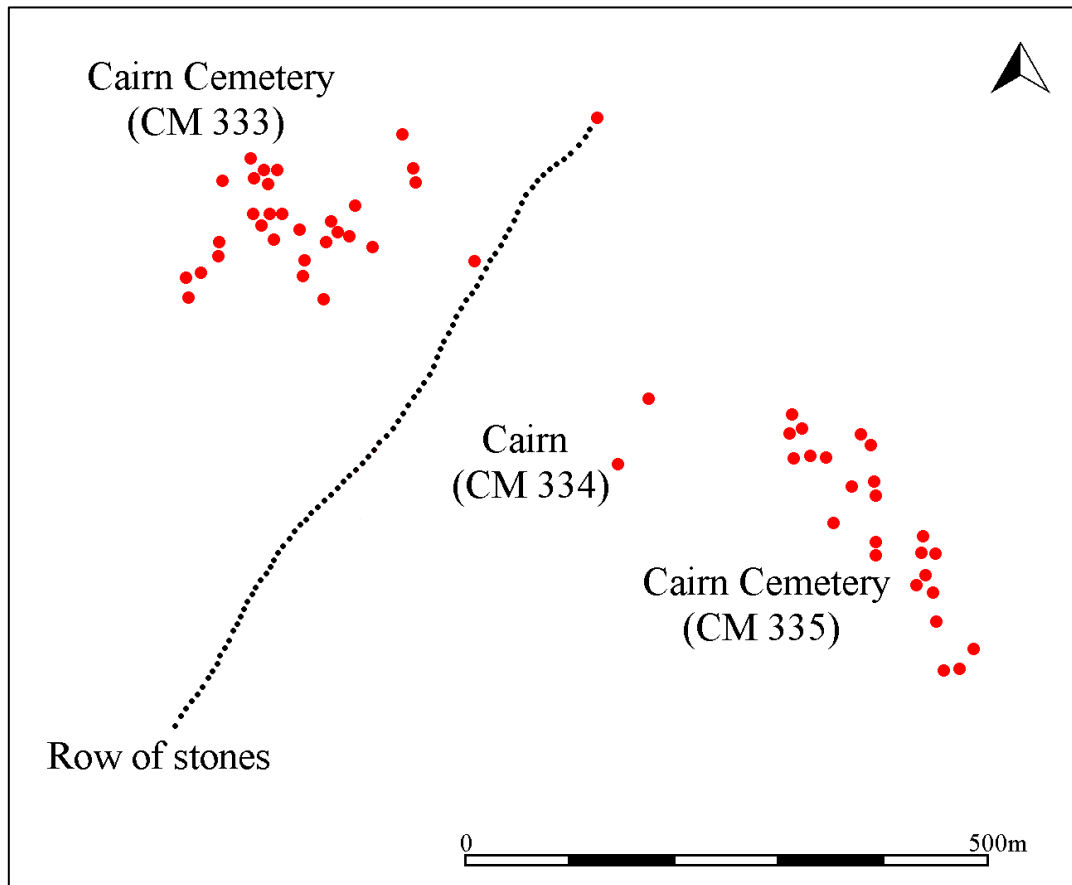
*The south eastern slope of Bancbryn. View from east.*



*The northern slope of Bancbryn. View from north.*



*Map showing the location of Bancbryn and its regional context*



*Simplified plan showing the position and orientation of the stone alignment relative to the adjacent cairns (red circles). The stone alignment leads from SN 68935 10329 to SN 68522 09736.*

### **The stone alignment at Bancbryn**

A single line of stones measuring over 700m long descends the southern slope of Bancbryn. The alignment can be traced from a small stony mound measuring 6m in diameter and standing up to 0.8m high at NGR SN 68935 10329 to a large recumbent stone at SN 68522 09736. A total of 172 stones were identified during a recent survey although more are likely to survive beneath the turf and three were recovered during excavations. The stones themselves are generally small although a significant number stand over 0.2m high. 52.4% of the stones are edge-set and have clearly been placed along the length of the common alignment. The remainder are mainly recumbent with the largest portion of these surviving within a 30m length centred on SN 68731 10018. The alignment is not completely straight, includes at least 15 conjoined segments, is situated between two cairn cemeteries and passes very close to a scheduled cairn at SN 68802 10180. A small number of the stones are not earth-fast but sit within clearly defined sockets. Many of the stones, in common with those visible in the adjacent cairns, are rounded in shape but a significant proportion have straight edges. The spacing between the visible stones varies over the whole length of the alignment but there are discrete areas where consistent spacing is observable. The stone is local limestone and there are no indications that it has been cut or worked in any way. Excavations carried out on a short length of the alignment revealed three stones “embedded” into the subsoil but no photographs are currently available. No artefacts or radio-carbon dating material were recovered. The upper half of the alignment is precisely aligned onto Hartland Point in Devon and denotes one edge of a small zone of inter-visibility between the cairn cemetery on Bancbryn and Barnstaple Bay.



Detail of stone alignment at SN 68687 09970



Stone alignment at SN 68736 10026. View from NE.



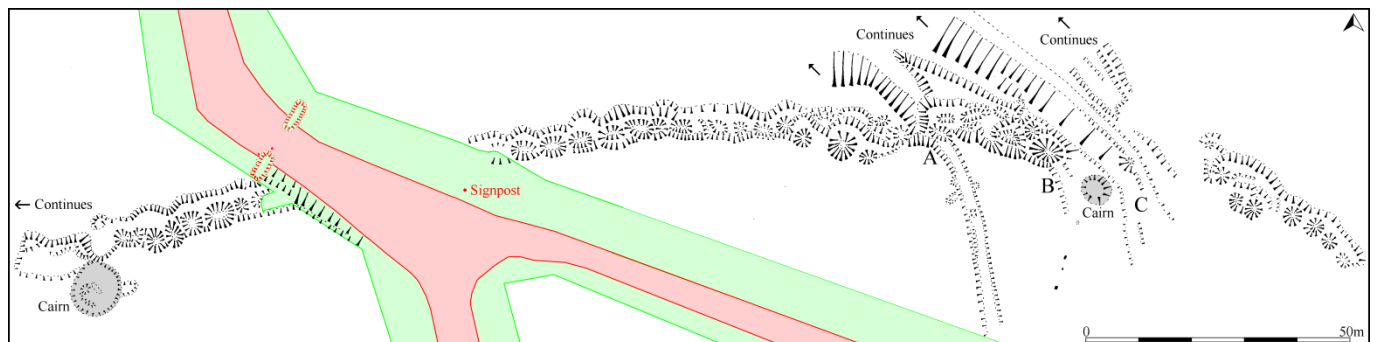
Stone alignment at SN 68736 10026. View from SW.



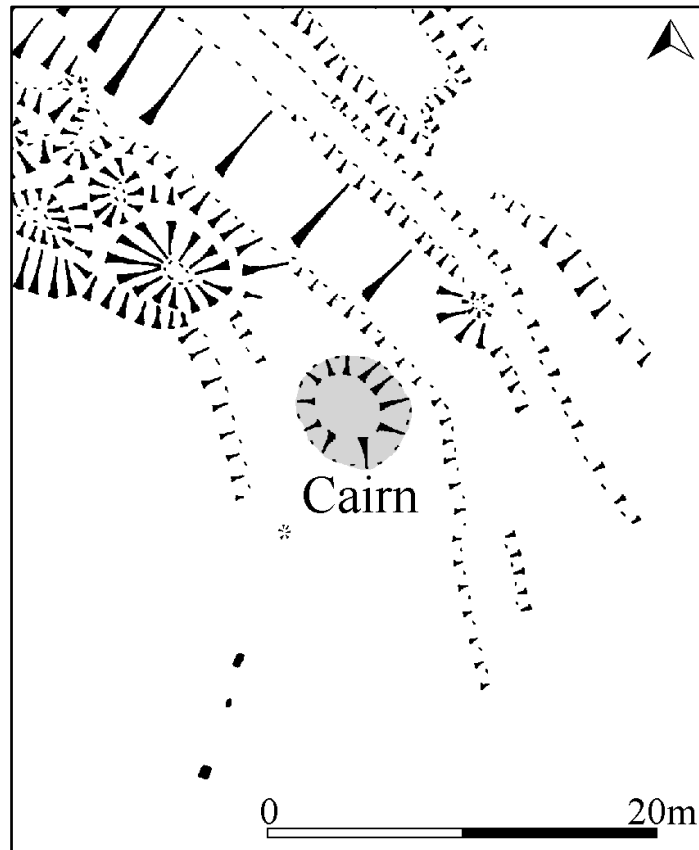
View from the northern side of the row at SN 68708 09990

## Survey

A 1:500 survey was carried out in December and January 2013. The survey was conducted using a prismatic compass and Disto D5 measuring device and a plan created in the field using an underlay protractor beneath drafting film. As well as the alignment, the area of coal mining earthworks adjacent to the cairn at the top was surveyed in order to inform interpretation of the stony mound at the top of the alignment.



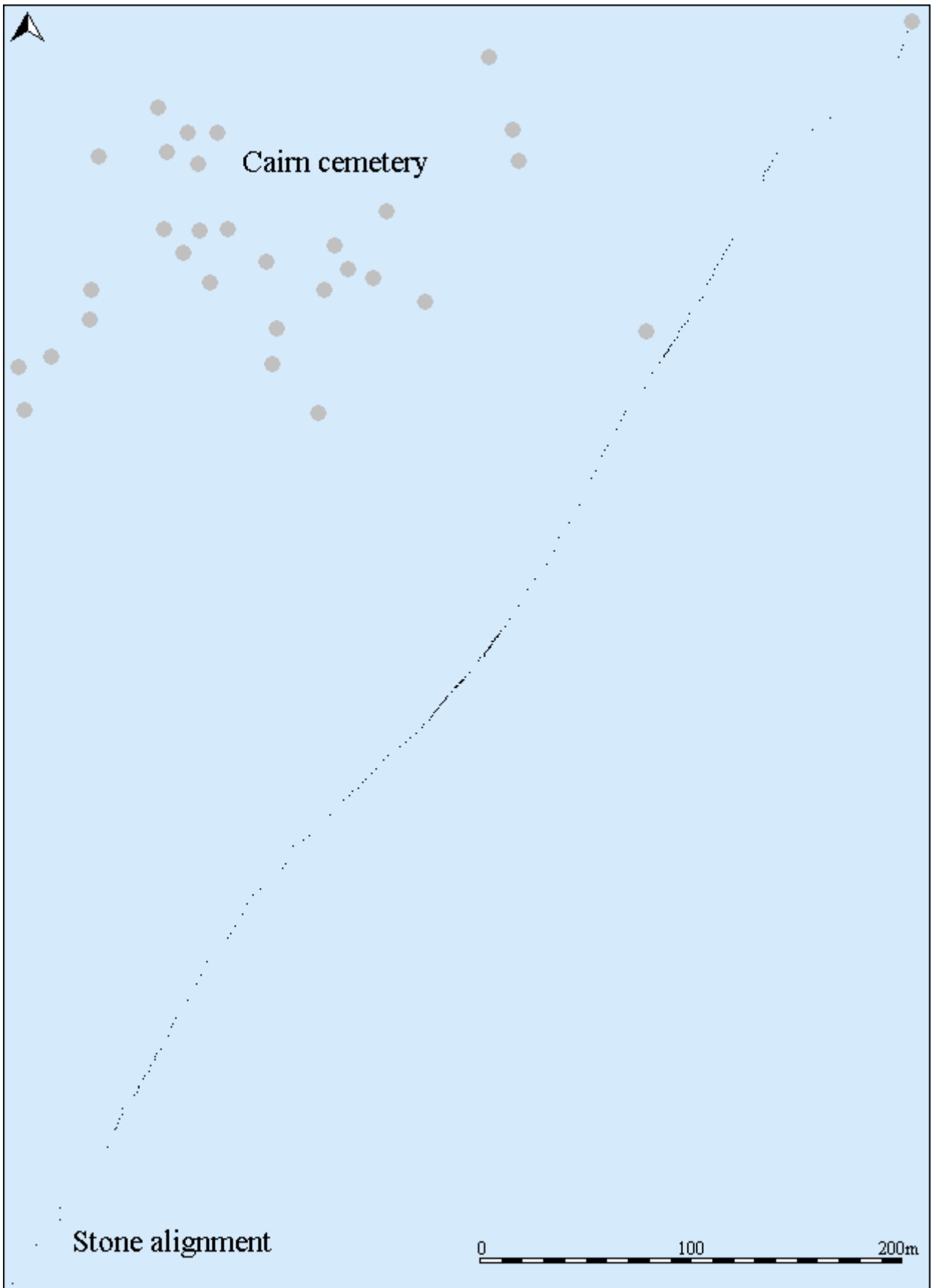
*Plan of the coal mining earthworks and cairn at the top of the alignment. The plan shows that holloways B and C, which are both earlier than the coal mining earthworks, respect the cairn. This relationship indicates that the cairn is the earliest feature in that area and not associated with the extraction of coal.*



*Plan of cairn at head of alignment*



*Cairn (SN 68935 10329) at upper end of the stone alignment. View from south east.*



Plan of Bancbryn stone alignment and adjacent cairns (grey circles)

## Case for a prehistoric stone alignment at Bancbryn

There is a considerable body of evidence to support a prehistoric explanation for the stone alignment. If as a starting point one believes in the possibility that the prehistoric peoples on either side of the Bristol Channel shared cultural links and beliefs then there is no reason to doubt that archaeological remains belonging to that period will share similar characteristics. Much has been made of the fact that the alignment is longer than other Welsh examples and therefore unlikely to be prehistoric, because Welsh examples are shorter. The irony of this position is hard not to notice. If the alignment had been largely destroyed it would have perhaps been more readily accepted. Fortunately, despite recent incursions the alignment survives very well and this should aid analysis of it. The case for a prehistoric origin for the alignment at Bancbryn is a solid one based on several separate strands of evidence that are cumulatively compelling. Indeed given the scrutiny lavished on this alignment, one wonders how many of the currently scheduled examples could offer such robust and convincing evidence to support their identification.

Any interpretative assessment needs as a starting point to define and agree the characteristics of the type of heritage being scrutinised. The most detailed and readily available resource for this purpose is the Monument Class Description for Stone Alignments published by English Heritage and available at:-

<http://www.eng-h.gov.uk/mpp/mcd/index.htm>

This document was specifically written to permit the objective assessment of stone alignments for scheduling purposes and therefore would seem the most appropriate tool to inform this discussion. Quotes from the Monument Class Description appear below in italics.

1. *“A stone alignment comprises a single line, or two or more roughly parallel lines, of upright stones set at intervals along a common axis or series of axes. The number and size of stones in known alignments varies greatly, but the minimum number of stones required to form an alignment is three. The word alignment here refers to the juxtapositioning of the stones forming the monument itself rather than to any supposed or observed orientation on other monuments and/or topographical features.”*

Discussion: This definition is not entirely accurate as some accepted rows consist entirely of recumbent stones, whilst many include significant numbers of horizontal slabs and edge-set stones. The Bancbryn alignment includes a single line of at least 175 stones of which a small number are upright, 52.4% are edge-set and the remainder are recumbent. These stones are set or lie at intervals along a series of axes and in common with the small stones forming Dartmoor alignments the edge-set stones are aligned along the prevailing axis.



*The stone alignment at SN 68835 10223*

2. *“Stone alignments are rarely absolutely straight; many are slightly curved or comprise conjoined segments of different orientation. In general, however, each stone alignment has a single and distinct axis, albeit a rather broad one in some cases.”*

Discussion: The Bancbryn alignment in common with all long stone alignments is not absolutely straight and comprises conjoined segments of different orientation. Preliminary analysis of the plan has identified 15 segments each with a slightly different alignment. The alignment as a whole is broadly orientated at 214° and varies between 198° and 230° with most of this variation being found at the upper end.



*One of the more obvious shifts in orientation*



*The same orientation shift after return of vegetation*



3. *“Stone alignments vary in length from about 40m, up to over 3000m, one of the longest being the example on Stall Down, Dartmoor, Devon. The most common length is about 150-200m.”*

Discussion: The alignment at Bancbryn is just over 700m long and therefore within the accepted range for this type of monument. The length is certainly longer than currently accepted Welsh alignments but given that the longer examples are very rare it would not be surprising for only a very small number to survive within Wales. On Dartmoor where at least 77 stone alignments have been recognised only four are longer than 700m. This represents a mere 5.2% of the total. By contrast the number of accepted alignments in Wales is at least 15. Acceptance of the Bancbryn alignment would mean that 6.25% of the known resource would be of the long variety – interestingly a very similar percentage to the situation on Dartmoor. Wales has far fewer stone alignments than Dartmoor and it is therefore hardly surprising that this very rare form of the monument has up until now proved elusive. It is, however, surely not valid to state that the alignment does not conform to the expected form when in fact viewed as part of the whole resource it does so perfectly.



*The Butterdon Hill stone alignment on Dartmoor measures 1973m long*

4. *“The size of the stones used in the construction of stone alignments varies greatly, both between monuments and within the length of individual structures”*

Discussion: Most of the stones within the alignment are relatively small (between 0.30m and 0.50m) although some are more substantial. The average stone height and size is similar to many South Western English and some Welsh stone alignments. The variety of stone size within the Bancbryn alignment is a recognised feature of prehistoric examples.



*Different sized stones are a recognised feature of stone alignments*

5. *“Stones which project less than 1m above ground level are most common, although a few alignments, mostly short ones, contain only very large stones over 2m high.”*

Discussion: Many of the Welsh alignments fall into the recognised group of short alignments with large stones. It is clear however that the different types are not mutually exclusive. In SW England short alignments of large stones and long alignments consisting mainly of small stones exist. There is no evidence to suggest that where examples of one type are found the other will not be. Stone alignments with very small stones are known within the Welsh archaeological resource and therefore the small size of the stones at Bancbryn represents no obstacle to a prehistoric explanation.

6. *“Where slabs of stone were used they were usually set with their long axis on the orientation of the alignment”.*

Discussion: The edge set stones at Bancbryn in common with other alignments are predominantly set with their long axis along the orientation of the alignment.

7. *“There is little evidence that the stones in any stone alignments were deliberately placed in graduated order of size”.*

Discussion: The stones have not yet been individually measured, but visual inspection would suggest that the stones have not been placed in graduated order of size.

8. *“In many cases the stone at each end of an alignment, terminal stones, are larger than those used elsewhere in the monument.”*

Discussion: The largest stone within the alignment denotes the south western end. This stone is recumbent and measures 0.62m by 0.52m by 0.25m. This feature provides particularly strong evidence to support a prehistoric identification.



*The recumbent terminal stone*

9. *“In other cases the end of an alignment may just fade out with a series of small stones then nothing.”*

Discussion: This means that terminal features do not always survive but at Bancbryn characteristic terminal features have been identified. The presence of these features enhances the prehistoric interpretation.

10. *“When assessing and measuring alignments it is important to check the ends very carefully to determine whether the visible terminals are likely to be the real ends of the monument or whether the line may continue under a blanket of peat or as a series of small stones”*

Discussion: The areas of the alignment towards the ends have both seen more disturbance than the central length which survives very well. The north eastern end had been disturbed by historic trackways and more recently by wind farm infrastructure whilst the south eastern end has also seen vehicular damage. Despite this the terminals are well defined.



*Part of stone alignment has recently been destroyed by wind farm infrastructure*

11. *“It must also be borne in mind that the ends of a stone alignment may have been "restored" in the past to make them look more impressive”*

Discussion: The Bancbryn alignment has not been restored. The survival of large numbers of recumbent slabs combined with the fact that the structure was not recorded by antiquarians means that it has not been interfered with in this way. This enhances its importance since it has not been modified.



*The terminal pillars at Drizzlecombe were re-erected in 1893.*

12. *The spacing of stones along the length of an alignment is often uneven although again some allowance must be made for the possibility of lost or fallen stones and for the movement of stones since they were erected.*

Discussion: The spacing of stones along the Bancbryn alignment as a whole is typically uneven but within some segments spacing is sometimes rather more regular. Some of the stones are also slightly out of line. These characteristics are also shared with SW English alignments.



*Regular spacing evident along this length of the alignment*

13. *“The number of stones in an alignment is loosely related to its length, but three stones is the minimum for any alignment”.*

Discussion: 175 stones (including three found during excavation) have been recorded at Bancbryn. This is the equivalent of one stone per 4.17m. In common with other long alignments stones have been lost or are buried but this number compares very favourably with Butterdon Hill where the figure is one stone per 3.67m and the Upper Erme where an average spacing of 3.60m has been noted. The broad similarities in stone spacing is of significance and provides further evidence of a direct parallel between the Bancbryn alignment and the longest Dartmoor stone alignments.

14. *“The terminals of many stone alignments are elaborated in various ways, although it must be emphasized that the attention given to alignment ends during “restoration” work makes assessment difficult.”*

Discussion: The cairn at the upper end and the large stone at the lower end represent elaboration which has not been affected by restoration. Single alignments often have cairns at their upper end and a large stone at the bottom. Indeed this is the classic form of the site and both features are present at Bancbryn.

15. *The use of larger than usual stones at terminals has already been noted, and in the case of stone alignments with two rows of uprights a large stone is sometimes set between the rows at one or both ends to block entry to the space between the rows of uprights. These are known as blocking stones.*

Discussion:-Blocking stones are a feature of double or multiple alignments only. The Bancbryn alignment is of the single alignment type.

16. *Local stones were generally used in the construction of stone alignments.*

Discussion: Local limestone stones were used in the construction of the Bancbryn alignment. Some of the differences in appearance between the Bancbryn alignment and those built in other geological zones may simply be the result of the different character of the available stones.



*Limestone blocks were used in the construction of the Bancbryn stone alignment*

17. *“There is no common orientation discernible among known alignments, and in many cases the terminals are not inter-visible suggesting that these monuments were not established as sighting-lines.”*

Discussion: Understanding of orientation has progressed since this was written. Work by Jeremy Butler on the Dartmoor alignments has identified that there is tendency for them to be orientated upwards towards the north-east quadrant. The Bancbryn alignment conforms to this as do the stone alignments on Bodmin Moor. In common with many alignments the terminals at Bancbryn are not inter-visible.

18. *“The function of stone alignments is not known; they are presumed to be ritual or ceremonial structures.”*

Discussion: This statement does not help with the assessment process though it worth emphasising that Cadw in 2006 described the area as *“a complex interconnected ritual landscape”* (Cadw., 2006). Such landscapes often have stone alignments within them.

19. *Stone alignments are generally dispersed monuments, although occasionally up to four examples may be found within a few hundred metres of one another as at Shoveldown, Dartmoor, Devon.*

Discussion: There are a significant number of alignments within the area. All lie north of Bancbryn with Saith Maen some 15km away being the nearest. The others are Cerrig Duon (19km), Nant Tarw (20km) and Trecastle Mountain (25km). Two of these sites consist of alignments comprising only very small stones.

20. *“Because of uncertainties about the dating of stone alignments and the duration of their use it is impossible to determine which regularly associated monuments represent contemporary associations.”*

Discussion: This is a problem associated with **all** stone alignments and does not detract from their significance.

21. *“Cairns, however, frequently occur at the end of an alignment (especially type I alignments), at some point along the course of an alignment, or beside an alignment.” \*\*\* ADD*

Discussion: There is a cairn at the head of this alignment and another beside it. A further small number of mounds close to the alignment may also relate to it although because there are considerable doubts over their identification they have been omitted from the mapping in this paper. These mounds were depicted in an earlier [publication](#). The presence of a cairn at the head of the alignment and another close by is yet another feature shared with the two longest Dartmoor alignments.



*Stones leading towards the cairn at the head of the alignment*



*Stone alignment in foreground passing a small cairn*

22. *“During a recent survey of the Plym Valley, Devon, it was found that all seven stone alignments in the study area had cairns at their up-slope ends.”*

Discussion: Cairns are often found at the upper end of single alignments. There is a cairn at the head of the Bancbryn stone alignment.

23. *“Standing stones and cists represent further classes of monument that were in use at broadly the same time and which are also sometimes spatially associated with stone alignments.”*

Discussion: Neither of the two longest Dartmoor alignments are known to be directly associated with separate standing stones or cists. The presence or absence of these features really does not affect the interpretation as many alignments are not connected with cists or individual standing stones.

24. *“In most cases the axis of the stone alignment is eccentric to any associated monuments such as cairns, circles, cists, or standing stones, suggesting that the construction of the stone alignment post-dates the construction of these associated features. This is also the case where stone alignments cut across the top of cairns or cists.”*



Discussion: The Bancbryn alignment occupies the space between two discrete clusters of cairn. The broad axis of the Bancbryn cemetery is 233°, whilst the Lletty'r- crydd cemetery is 142° and the orientation from the top of the alignment to the bottom is 214°. Inspection of the plans confirms this eccentric association.

25. *"In many upland areas stone alignments lie within concentrations of monuments, usually just outside field systems of various classes within areas that are rich in burial and ceremonial sites."*

Discussion: This certainly describes precisely the situation at Bancbryn. The stone alignment lies within an upland area rich in burial and ceremonial sites a short distance from historic fields.

26. *"Detailed surveys on Bodmin Moor and Dartmoor over the past few years have significantly increased the number of stone alignments recorded and our understanding of those already known. This is principally because most stone alignments are found in relatively remote areas and are not easily seen from aerial reconnaissance or casual survey"*.

Discussion: Even on Dartmoor and Bodmin Moor which have been subjected to considerable archaeological attention, fresh discoveries of stone alignments continue to be made. Once discovered there is universal surprise that the structure had gone unnoticed for so long. The discovery of a stone alignment usually follows a change in vegetation or a particularly intensive piece of fieldwork. This type of archaeology is very likely to be overlooked by walk-over or desk based surveys.

27. *"The former position of most fallen or robbed stones will be marked by their socket cut into the subsoil. Some alignments are wholly or partly preserved beneath blanket bog."*

Discussion: It is acknowledged that not all stones will be marked by sockets cut into the subsoil. The reason for this position is clear. Small stones could be erected firmly by insertion into the turf and topsoil alone without the need to disturb the subsoil. Large stones on the other hand would need additional support and a socket cut into the subsoil would have provided this. The absence of socket holes (should this prove to be the case) should therefore not represent a barrier to acceptance of the prehistoric explanation.

28. *"Preservation is generally good and most recorded examples are fairly complete, with perhaps 60% of the stones still standing. Most contain some fallen stones."*

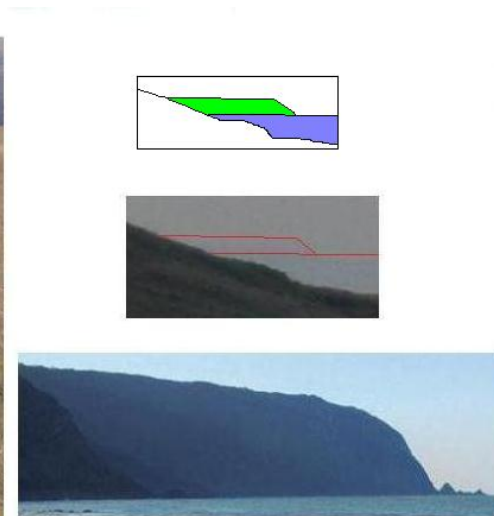
Discussion: Fallen stones are a feature of stone alignments. Those alignments that have not been restored tend to have a larger percentage of fallen stones. The 60% mentioned in the Monument Class Description is not dissimilar to the 54.2% edge-set stones at Bancbryn and again reinforces the prehistoric explanation. The Bancbryn alignment in common with other upland alignments is fairly complete. Despite the apparent fragility of this resource, examples often survive surprisingly well and this is also the case at Bancbryn. The looseness of some stones is a characteristic that is shared with other alignments of this type.

29. *"Because of the size of the stones used in most alignments they are very vulnerable to damage; small stones can be hidden from view by rough grass and bracken and are therefore vulnerable to being inadvertently knocked over or removed, large stones are highly desirable for walling, road building, or other construction work."*

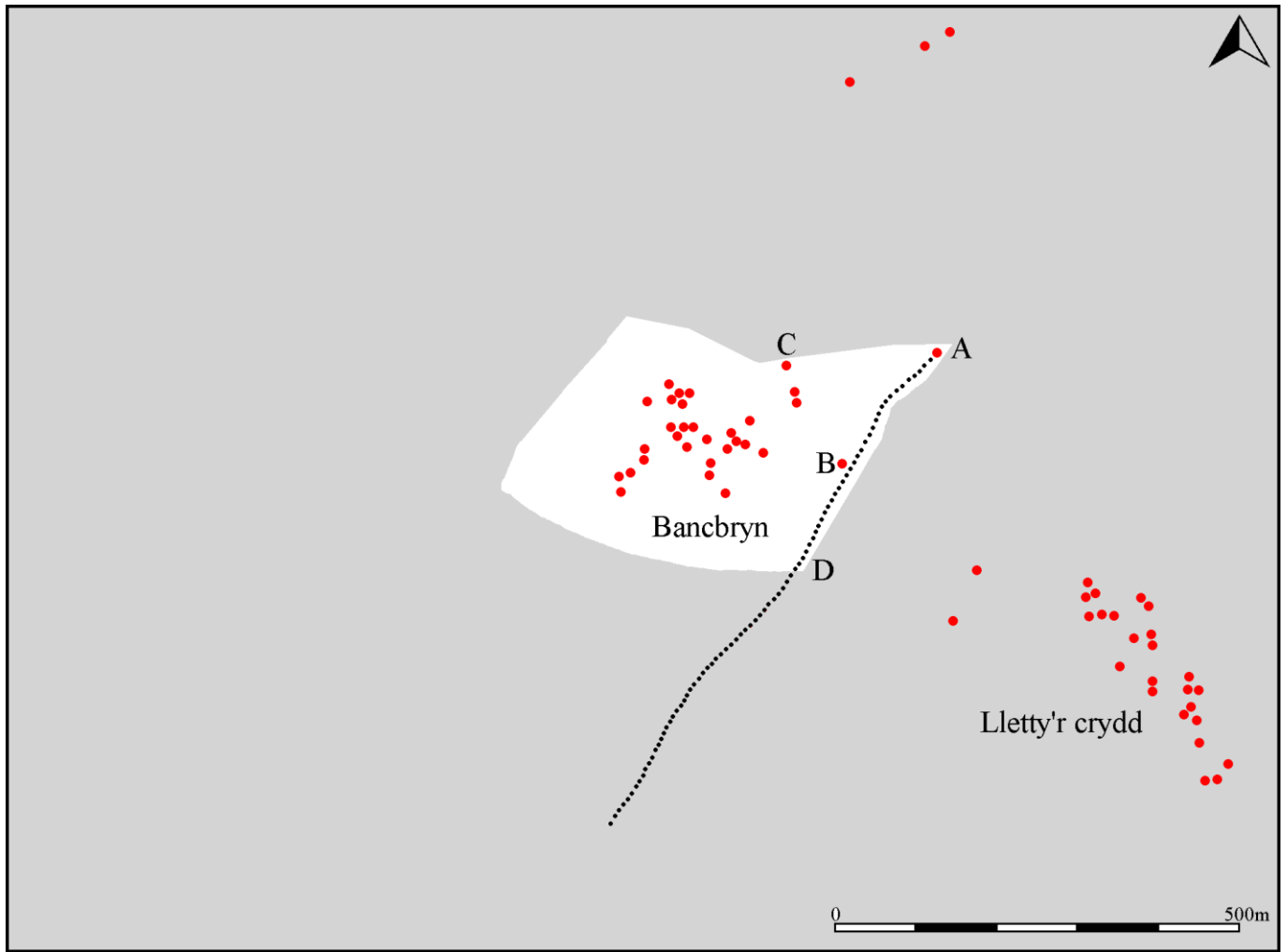
Discussion: The small stones at Bancbryn were hidden from view by heather and molinia. This comment does not relate to the assessment process but does emphasise that monuments of this type are fragile.

30. "At Merrivale, Dartmoor, the stone alignments appear to separate a group of ceremonial monuments from a concentration of hut circles and settlement sites."

Discussion: The stone alignment at Bancbryn is not known to separate ritual and settlement areas, but the idea that alignments can perform the function of separating different zones is one that has a very real significance at Bancbryn. Looking along the upper part of the stone alignment on Bancbryn, Hartland Point (Devon) forms a very obvious distant but precise focus on clear days.



This relationship is clearly of interest and almost certainly of significance. Walking downhill (southwards) along the upper length of the alignment an observer always has Hartland Point just visible over the shoulder of the intervening hill. The position and orientation of the alignment precisely allows this juxtaposition to be maintained until at the point where it is finally lost, the axis of the alignment shifts more significantly westward. This type of visual relationship is one recognised as significant in prehistoric studies. From the point where Hartland Point disappears (Point D on map below) the alignment instead becomes focussed on the sharp sided valley west of Banc John which has a very similar profile to Tor Clawdd which framed the left side of Hartland Point. The alignment without any doubt therefore takes full cognisance of Hartland Point, but is this deliberate or a coincidence? The fact that the upper shifts in orientation of the alignment all result in maintaining the same view to Hartland Point and the alignment shifts significantly at the point where Hartland Point disappears below the horizon supports the idea that there is a strong element of deliberation. This suggestion is further strengthened by the observation that the stone alignment effectively also denotes the edge of a small area on Bancbryn that benefits from views to the sea and Devon. This small area also contains a large number of cairns. This compelling evidence which indicates a direct and powerful visual link between the stone alignment, adjacent cairn cemetery and the distant Devon coast is one that can only be challenged by dismissing the idea that stone alignments could separate areas and more importantly that in the siting of monuments visual relationships played no part in prehistoric society. It is therefore perhaps fitting to finish with Cadw's own observation regarding the distribution of the cairns that "It would be reasonable to assume from the relative positioning of these sites that they had visual relationships in antiquity" (Cadw., 2006).



*Map showing the extent of the small area from which views of Devon are possible (white). The south eastern edge of this area is precisely denoted by the stone alignment. Views from within the Bancbryn cemetery include much of Bideford Bay whilst along the alignment itself the view is restricted to Hartland Point only. Devon is not visible from the Lletty'r-crydd cemetery.*



*View from the stone alignment looking along its axis towards Hartland Point. The shifts in the alignment ensure that this remarkable visual relationship between Tor Clawdd and Hartland Point is maintained as you walk along the upper part of the alignment.*



*View from cairn B adjacent to the alignment. Despite being only 10m away from the position the photograph above was taken three times as much of Devon is now visible. The stone alignment denotes the edge of a small area where Devon is rapidly revealed as you walk through it. The fact that there are also so many cairns within this area would signify that it was of considerable interest to the prehistoric inhabitants.*



*View from cairn C. Although only 140m from Cairn B much of North Devon is now visible. Views such as this are confined to the small area which is accurately denoted along its south eastern side by the stone alignment.*

### **Conclusion**

Much has been made of the lack of evidence to support a prehistoric explanation for the stone alignment at Bancbryn. Assessing the site against the scheduling assessment documentation indicates that such claims are hard to defend. There is an abundance of evidence and it all points one way. By contrast if the currently scheduled Welsh alignments were subjected to the same detailed scrutiny many would perhaps be found wanting. The stone alignment at Bancbryn survives within a very pertinent prehistoric context not evident at other Welsh alignments and clearly conforms to all of the characteristics of this type of monument. The similarities with the longer Dartmoor alignments are powerful as is the direct and compelling visual link with Devon. All of this together with a simple but sound statistical explanation for the apparent absence of long stone alignments within the Welsh archaeological record creates a persuasive evidence based interpretation supporting a prehistoric explanation for this alignment.

### **Acknowledgements**

I have had considerable help from a number of people whilst preparing this paper. I would like to thank Nigel Swift for commenting constructively on all aspects and Sophie Smith for digging out hard to find information as well as being a harsh critic of my more outlandish ideas. Helen Woodley has also provided a stream of incredibly useful ideas and was the first to spot the Hartland Point link. George Currie has helped hone the illustrations and provided incredibly helpful feedback. Finally Helen Gerrard has skilfully edited the result and been an inspiration through the discovery process.

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Monument Class Description for Stone Alignments published by English Heritage and available at:-

<http://www.eng-h.gov.uk/mpp/mcd/index.htm>