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Citation for final published version:

Shiner, Marion and Seaman, Andrew 2026. New pieces, a high-status early medieval settlement in the Welsh Marches: preliminary results from the 1996-2000 excavations. *Archaeology in Wales* 64 , pp. 189-191.

Publishers page:

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New Pieces, a High-Status Early Medieval Settlement in the Welsh Marches: Preliminary Results from the 1996-2000 Excavations

Between 1996 and 2000, Christopher Arnold and Jeremy Huggett directed five seasons of excavation at New Pieces, a scheduled hillslope enclosure (Mg081) within the Breidden Hills, Criggion, Powys (SJ 2976 1398; Figure 1). The features they recorded, and the artefactual evidence they recovered are of great significance for their contribution to understanding and interpretation of what was revealed to be a nationally important site. Short annual interim reports were produced (Arnold & Huggett 1996a and 1997–2000) and Ewan Campbell prepared a preliminary report on some finds. However, except for a brief note after the first season of fieldwork (Arnold & Huggett 1996b), the excavations were not published prior to Arnold's retirement from archaeology. Subsequently the archive was held by Jeremy Huggett at the University of Glasgow, but in 2024 it was transferred to the current authors, who are undertaking a comprehensive programme of post-excavation analysis as part of *Making the March*, a Leverhulme Trust funded interdisciplinary project researching the early medieval frontier in the Welsh Marches (Grant no. RPG-2023-135). Our aim is to fully publish the 1996–2000 fieldwork alongside new data provided by Lidar, a re-consideration of earlier excavations (O'Neil 1937), and the results of new fieldwork undertaken during 2025 as part of *Making the March*. This note summarizes the first stage of this initiative, which includes assessment of the site archive and finds, analysis of the stratigraphy recorded by Arnold and Huggett, and offers a preliminary discussion of the site's chronology, interpretation and significance.

The Breidden Hills overlook the Severn Plain and afford panoramic views that take in the early medieval frontier. The line of Offa's Dyke can be traced to both north and south, but the hills coincide with an apparent gap in the earthwork that is filled by the River Severn (the modern border between Wales and England passes to the east of the hills). Although the views from New Pieces enclosure itself are partially obscured by the higher ground to the north and south, there are narrow, but extensive, views to both east and west. Historically, the Severn was navigable up to Pool Quay, at the foot of the hills just 3.7km west of New Pieces.

Figure 1. Location map, showing major navigable rivers and Offa's Dyke and Wat's Dyke (black lines). Contours at 100m intervals.

New Pieces is defined by two enclosures bounded by widely spaced banks. Both are visible on Lidar, along with a previously unrecorded rectangular platform in the north of the site, between the banks (Figure 2). Both banks also appear to overlie an undated field system between New Pieces and the Breiddin hillfort, which is located on The Breidden hill, to the north. As noted by both O'Neil (1937) and Musson (1991), neither the location nor the

earthworks are particularly defensive, although the innermost bank is a substantial earthwork.

Figure 2. Lidar mapping showing New Pieces (circled) and adjacent field system to the north. The surviving remains of The Breiddin hillfort are located on the spur of land to the north-west, close to the quarrying which has removed much of that site.

Preliminary analysis of the stratigraphy recorded by Arnold and Huggett shows that post holes and gullies excavated by O'Neil (1937), whose exploratory trench they reopened, were located on a platform terraced into the slope in the northern area of the inner enclosure. Once O'Neil's trench had been reexcavated, it was extended to both east and south. This revealed a complex of further cut features. Eight were cut into a layer of redeposited boulder clay, potentially derived from the Bank 1 rampart, while a further forty-five were cut into the natural. Some intercutting was evident, with sixty-five cut features recorded in total (Figure 3). The finds recovered include pottery and glass fragments, metal items, lithics, burnt clay, burnt bone, animal bone, possible crucible fragments, slag, and charcoal. Much of this material came from O'Neil's backfill but some was recovered from stratified contexts.

Figure 3. Combined plan of features at New Pieces excavated by O'Neil (red text) and Arnold and Huggett (black text).

Almost all the cut features described above had been sealed beneath deposit (009), a dark brown to black soil containing numerous small finds. Among these was a copper-alloy rim clip from a stave-built bucket with parallels in Anglo-Saxon funerary contexts and at other western British hillfort sites, including Dinas Powys and Dinorben (Graham-Campbell 1991). Numerous small finds were also recovered from deposit (008), a grey-black layer which sealed deposit (009). These include animal bone, hearth bases, and a copper alloy zoomorphic object (Arnold & Huggett 1999). The latter has tentatively been identified as having an origin in Roman Egypt (pers. comm. Andy Seaman 2024).

Preliminary assessment of the lithics recovered has identified diagnostic forms of Neolithic to Early Bronze Age date. A single fragment of pitchstone or obsidian may be of Neolithic date but requires further analysis. As far as it is currently possible to determine, all this material appears to be redeposited, but some undated and stratigraphically early features could be of prehistoric origin. Nevertheless, the material indicates activity in the vicinity during the Neolithic and Bronze Age.

Romano-British activity is represented by twenty-five sherds of pottery, a small quantity of early Roman vessel glass, and three beads. This material spans the first/second to the fourth centuries AD but, as with the prehistoric material, is likely redeposited in later contexts. However, this does not rule out the possibility that some undated and stratigraphically early

features are Romano-British. It is also possible that the inner enclosure is a Romano-British feature. When considered alongside O’Neil’s Romano-British finds, the material from Arnold’s and Huggett’s excavation is of sufficient quantity to indicate fairly significant activity at the site from at least the mid-second century AD and into the fourth century. The assemblage includes earlier material than that reported from the Breiddin hillfort where, except for one coin of Antoninus Pius (AD 138–161), the assemblage is late Roman in character (Musson 1991, 192–3).

To conclude, the Arnold and Huggett excavations demonstrated the presence of undisturbed archaeological features at New Pieces. There is evidence for prehistoric and Roman activity of uncertain character, but the early medieval assemblage is substantial and is of national significance, as it places New Pieces alongside major western British sites of the fifth to the seventh centuries AD, including Dinas Powys, Longbury Bank and Tintagel (Alcock 1963; Campbell & Lane 1993; Barrowman et al. 2007; Seaman 2013; Campbell et al. 2023). These sites are typically interpreted as high-status residences and power centres, but New Pieces is distinct in its inland and comparatively high altitude location. Full analysis of the existing archival material is therefore a key research priority. Uncertainties persist, however, concerning the origin, function, and chronology of the site, particularly the upstanding earthworks, which remain undated. Full understanding is also currently hindered by issues arising from past excavation and recording techniques, and the lack of scientific dating and environmental sampling and analysis. We hope to address these issues through further fieldwork and subsequent analyses.

Acknowledgements

This research is supported by a Leverhulme Trust Research Project Grant (Grant no. RPG-2023-135). We are grateful to Dr Jeremy Huggett for facilitating access to the archive and providing information about the 1996-2000 excavations. We are also grateful to Dr Ewan Campbell, Ian Dennis, Dan Garner, Dr Alan Lane, Dr Bryn Morris and Dr Hugh Willmott for providing additional information or discussing the finds and aspects of interpretation.

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