

# **AMMANFORD CASTLE, AMMANFORD Carmarthenshire**

## **Managing a medieval timber fortress**

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Prepared by Dyfed Archaeological Trust  
For Cadw

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### AMMANFORD CASTLE, AMMANFORD Carmarthenshire Managing a medieval timber fortress

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# **AMMANFORD CASTLE**

## **Managing a medieval timber fortress**

### **1.0 Introduction**

The impressive earthwork remains of Ammanford Castle lie in the grounds behind 'Cartref' and Swn y Gwynt Hospital on Tir y Dail Road, Ammanford. The castle is currently owned by Ammanford Town Council (henceforth the "Town Council"), which has responsibility for its maintenance and presentation.

The site has been neglected for a considerable time, though community interest has in recent years led to renewed interest in the site. In 2007 the Dyfed Archaeological Trust (henceforth the "Trust") undertook a topographical survey of the castle site, which was commissioned by Carmarthenshire County Council. The following year a successful National Festival of Archaeology Open Day, hosted by the Trust and the Ammanford Archaeology and History Society (henceforth the "Society") was held at the castle. In 2010 the castle saw its first archaeological excavation, carried out by the Trust and volunteers and funded by Cadw.

It is therefore opportune to consider how further progress can be maintained in the maintenance and presentation of this medieval castle, an important type-site for our understanding of the Norman conquest and Welsh response in 12<sup>th</sup> century South Wales.

To promote this ambition and raise the profile of the castle, Cadw funded an archaeological excavation at the castle in July 2010 and, as part of this project, has asked the Trust to prepare a draft Management Plan for the consideration of the Town Council and Cadw.

This report therefore should be seen as one of the outcomes of Cadw's 2010-11 project, which considers the potential and future of the castle providing consideration for its management and presentation. It should be read in conjunction with the archaeological report (July 2010).

It will be a matter for the Town Council and Cadw to consider the implementation and timetables for proposals raised in this document.

### **2.0 Location (SN 62418 12477)**

The castle lies close to the urban centre of Ammanford at Tir y Dail Road. Immediately to the east lie the buildings of Cartref and Swn y Gwynt Day Hospital. Immediately to the west lies the Heart of Wales railway, with Ammanford Railway Station 250m to the north. The castle was built on a glacial terrace, 4m above the flood plain of the Afon Llŵchwr, the modern course of which lies 90m from the western defences of the castle. In the medieval period the river could have been much closer to the castle providing effective defence on this side.

### **3.0 Ownership**

The castle has been acquired from Carmarthenshire County Council by the Town Council, which now has sole responsibility for its maintenance and public usage.

### **4.0 Description of the castle (Figs 2,3,4,5,6)**

The main feature of the castle is a large motte c36m in diameter and 5m high. The motte is well preserved and its summit has a dished profile, which may have been an original feature. To the north the motte is well defended by banks and ditches, forming a crescent shaped hornwork. The defences to the west of the motte and hornwork are also well preserved, though the ditch on this side has been masked by the construction of the railway.

The precise limits of the castle to the south and east are not currently known. A level lawned area to the south behind Cartref could represent part of a large castle bailey before the ground falls into the stream bed immediately to the south of the site, which has been extensively landscaped in the post-medieval period.

The extent of the castle to the east is also not currently known and it is probable that the extant modern buildings have damaged castle remains in this area. However, the boundary wall on the Tir y Dail road retains an earth bank, which could be the remains of a rampart, with the ditch occupying the line of the modern road (Fig 11). Across the road to the south east lies an east-west bank, which could also represent part of the castle, perhaps an outer bailey or defended settlement (Fig 12).

## **5.0 History**

Due to the lack of surviving documentary evidence, the origins and builders of the castle, whether Norman or Welsh, are obscure and although opinion is divided, the castle in its present form almost certainly dates to the 12<sup>th</sup> century and is a significant regional example of a timber fortress of this conquest period.

The castle was undoubtedly originally and strategically placed on the southern border of Cantref Bychan, which Henry 1 gave to Richard FitzPons by 1116. The castle may well have been built to control the border between Cantref Bychan and the Lordship of Gower to the south, which was given by the same king to Henry of Beaumont in 1106. At some time before the 13<sup>th</sup> century this frontier was moved south to higher ground just below Penlle'r Castell on the northern edge of Mynydd y Gwair. The land gained was essentially the parish of Betws, which was later held by the Welsh lords of Iscennen and became the subject of considerable dispute. By this time the frontier role of Ammanford Castle had been eclipsed. The castle is also sited within a few miles of the Commote of Carnwylion to the south west, which was held by the Norman lords of Kidwelly in the early 12th century.

The castle site was therefore well chosen at the confluence of three political and administrative entities and in many ways is symbolic of the region's political and military struggles of the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

## **6.0 Archaeology**

Little archaeological work has been possible at the castle to date, but it is probably significant that no remains of stone defences or buildings were found in the 2010 excavations. The castle is therefore a prime example of a timber castle of the Anglo-Norman conquest period. This type of castle is shown five times on the 11<sup>th</sup> century Bayeux Tapestry, and documentary and archaeological evidence elsewhere can be used to develop a good picture of the castle's early form and scale.

There is no doubt that the buried archaeology of the castle is an important resource for our further understanding of these enigmatic military structures of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Further archaeological excavation of Ammanford Castle would significantly add to our understanding of the site and its wider context. Such work, however, on timber remains,



although rewarding, requires area excavation, care and patience and such time-consuming research is currently not contemplated as part of this report.

## **7.0 Status and constraints**

The site of Ammanford Castle is subject to the following legislative and other constraints:

The castle is a scheduled ancient monument under the terms of the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979. Any work to the monument must receive the prior consent of Welsh Government through Cadw.

Development proposals outside the scheduled area, but potentially within the curtilage of the castle will normally require the consent of the Local Planning Authority. Such proposals are governed by Planning Policy Wales, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, Welsh Office Circular 60/96 – *Planning and the Historic Environment: Archaeology* and the local plan policies of Carmarthenshire County Council as currently contained in the Unitary Development Plan

The site is owned and managed by Ammanford Town Council. The permission of the Town Council is required for any works that will affect the monument.

The site is currently protected by a blanket Tree Preservation Order (TPO). The permission of Carmarthenshire County Council is required for tree removal in the designated area.

## **8.0 Condition (Figs 1, 7,8,9,10)**

The monument is currently severely overgrown with undergrowth, which masks much of the castle's earthworks all year round. The site has a number of large mature trees, which are considered to be an asset to the monument. Site clearance in 2007 removed some of the smaller trees and undergrowth. However, this partial clearance introduced improved light into the site and as a result of this, and the subsequent lack of maintenance, the castle has seen the widespread colonisation of bramble and the regeneration of the smaller trees (Fig x). The site, therefore, does not benefit from a stable grass cover and is currently vulnerable to continuing erosion of the earthworks. Additionally, in this overgrown and unkempt state the public has no opportunity to understand the dimension, scale and form of the castle, which in turn contributes to a lack of interest in and appreciation locally of the town's castle.

No ecological survey has been carried out at the site to identify plant species, which may be affected by any further clearance changes to the site. Equally no ornithological or bat survey has been undertaken, which should be a prerequisite before any further tree or scrub clearance.

The castle earthworks are generally robust and in good condition, apart from two areas on the south site of the motte. Here some trees have fallen with root disturbance causing undermining and erosion of the motte profile.

To the south of the motte lies a large prefabricated building in poor condition. A large lawned area, beyond, which might be part of the castle bailey, is no longer being maintained and is in danger of reverting to scrub.

There is no evidence on site of badger or rabbit activity, the setts and warren of which would be detrimental to archaeological interests and conservation.

Overall the castle site is unfortunately overwhelmed and dominated by scrub vegetation with insufficient light to encourage beneficial grass growth. There is currently no management plan or regime in place to maintain the castle site. As a consequence the castle earthworks are currently impenetrable for most of the year and cannot be appreciated for their scale and historical significance.

## **9.0 Potential**

Ammanford Castle is recognisably the oldest surviving construction in Ammanford. As a 12<sup>th</sup> century military monument it is a physical reminder of the turbulent times of the period, which saw an Anglo-Norman conquest and an active and prolonged response by the native Welsh princes. The castle is essentially a border fortress and evokes a period of dispute, struggle and raiding, particularly with the Lordship of Gower to the south.

The site already has tremendous 'sense of place' and can become a source of interest and inspiration for the local population and visitors. The castle can act as an educational medium in schools and colleges for the better understanding of Ammanford and the region's medieval past.

The site provides an opportunity for the people of Ammanford to become involved in the conservation and interpretation of **their** castle and it is anticipated that the success or otherwise of a regeneration project will depend on the active involvement of the community under professional guidance.

## **10.0 Proposals**

The aspiration is to engage with the people of Ammanford in order to better appreciate and manage their castle and its setting. The following key proposals and stages need to be considered. Each stage is seen as consecutive and consequential on the successful delivery of the previous stage. The motto for such a project should be that 'success will breed success'.

### ***Stage One***

The formation of a castle steering group to promote the interests, direction and future benefits of the castle. This group should comprise representatives of all the stakeholders and interested bodies, including the Town Council, Carmarthenshire County Council, adjacent land owners (Day Hospital, Cartref, etc), The Ammanford Archaeology and History Society, The Dyfed Archaeological Trust, ecological interests, etc.

### ***Stage Two***

The priority issue is the delivery of a monument management plan, which will remove and control the rampant undergrowth and introduce improved light in order to gain an open, grassed 'parkland' appearance of the castle earthworks. Only when this is carried out can the castle site become accessible and intelligible to the general public and visitors.

It is anticipated that the castle grounds will mainly consist of low-maintenance grass, which can be quickly and easily mechanically strimmed once or twice a year. The existing mature and interesting species trees should be retained and managed. On the south side of the motte, repair work to the structure of the mound may be required. When completed, this work will stabilise the earthworks and provide enhanced and safe public access to the site.

### ***Stage Three***

With the castle earthworks stabilised it will be possible to consider improved public access to the site, which will generate greater interest in the monument. It is currently anticipated that public access from Tir y Dail road to the monument will be from the north or east side of the castle in order to avoid existing and anticipated building usage. The north side of the castle also affords one of the best vantage points for the motte and ditched defences, and it is anticipated that a viewing area can be created in this area. Access to the castle site from the railway station to the north should also be considered.

#### ***Stage Four***

Public access will eventually demand intelligible interpretation at the site, in the form of signage, panels with information and reconstruction images, leaflets, etc. It is not proposed that the site should have paid staff, but it would benefit from the presence of volunteers during the summer, who would be able to give guided tours of the monument.

### **11.0 Timescales**

It is difficult at this stage to identify a fixed timetable to achievement. Nevertheless it is important at the outset to have 'milestones' and fixed targets and the following timetable is offered for consideration.

Clearly the primary target must be to clear and present the castle grounds to the public. Clearance work could be considered for this winter in preparation for grass seeding in the spring of 2012.

#### ***Year 1 – Stage 1(2011-2012)***

1. Formation of an Ammanford Castle Steering Group.
2. Presentation and agreement with Management Plan proposals.
3. A decision by the Town Council to support a programme of grounds' work, which should commence in the autumn, when foliage has died down. It is anticipated that much of the work will be carried out by local volunteers, though tools and safety equipment may need to be provided by the town Council.
4. The Town Council may need to obtain scheduled monument consent for this work from Cadw.
5. Early advice needs to be taken from other environmental concerns
6. In terms of the Tree Preservation Order, the permission of Carmarthenshire County Council will be required for felling any agreed trees. This felling will not include the large mature or important species trees.
7. Contact should be made with the media to see if the project could be recorded for eventual transmission.
8. Open Day at the castle in late summer ?
9. First Ammanford Castle annual public meeting and lecture organised in the town in October/November.

#### ***Year 2 – Stage 2 (2012-13)***

1. Areas cleared of scrub will be seeded in the Spring, using a recommended short growth grass species. Tree regeneration will be prevented, if necessary, through the use of recommended chemical agents.
2. A programme of voluntary maintenance will be carried out during the growing season. Town Council may be asked to provide equipment.
3. A programme of public outreach events, including school visits, lectures, open-day, etc, should be formulated.
4. In the autumn/winter further work on site clearance should be undertaken as necessary.
5. Second Ammanford Castle annual public meeting organised in October.
6. Proposals formulated for a programme of historical and archaeological research.

***Year 3- Stage 3 (2013-14)***

1. Final areas of scrub clearance will be seeded in the Spring, using a recommended short growth grass species. Tree regeneration will be prevented, if necessary, through the use of recommended chemical agents.
2. A programme of voluntary maintenance will be carried out during the growing season. The Town Council may be asked to provide equipment.
3. A programme of public outreach events, including school visits, lectures, open-day, etc, should be formulated.
4. A programme of archaeological research may be considered, though this is dependent on funding and specialist involvement.
5. Preparation of a booklet on the History of Ammanford Castle. Funding sources identified.
6. Provision of viewing area with seating. Funding sources identified
7. Third Ammanford Castle annual public meeting organised in October.

***Year 4 – Stage 4 (2014-15)***

1. A programme of voluntary maintenance will be carried out during the growing season. The Town Council may be asked to provide equipment.
2. A programme of public outreach events, including school visits, lectures, open-day, etc, should be formulated.
3. Further interpretation may be required at the castle in the form of display boards with reconstruction drawings.
4. Continuing archaeological research?
5. Transmitting televised programme?

## **12.0 Costs**

It is difficult at this stage to envisage what financial resources will be required, but the following points should be considered:

- A. The castle project should be seen as a community venture with local people becoming involved in all aspects of the work, including physical effort.
- B. There will undoubtedly be costs for tools and equipment, safety gear, grass seed, etc. These support costs may need to be considered by the Town Council and County Council
- C. The steering Group will need to identify and secure funding sources and sponsorship to meet specific proposals.
- D. The Town Council may wish to consider the benefits of applying for a management agreement with Cadw under Section 17 of the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979. Under this agreement, Cadw may be able to provide some grant support for capital works to the site, and a contribution towards agreed maintenance works over a 5 year period.

## **13.0 Conclusion**

Ammanford Castle is an important 12<sup>th</sup> century military site, which has long been neglected. The site is the oldest monument in Ammanford and is worthy of regeneration for the benefits that this can bring to local communities.

Therefore, it is hoped that this short report can act as a catalyst and launch for a project, which will see the regeneration of Ammanford Castle as a local and regional amenity, resource and asset. The motto of such a project should be that 'success will breed success'.

The project should be long-term and should not be a financial burden on the Town Council.

The project should provide opportunities and outlets for all interested parties, and particularly for local people, to get involved with their castle.



**Fig 1.** The castle, overgrown with vegetation, from the north-east



**Fig 2** The northernmost ditch of the castle looking south





**Fig 3.** The northern motte ditch



**Fig 4.** The motte from the east





**Fig 5.** The grassed southern bailey? And motte obscured by evergreens



**Fig 6.** Southern motte ditch sloping northwards toward motte





**Fig 7.** Tree root damage on south face of motte



**Fig 8.** Example of tree root damage on archaeologically sensitive rampart





**Fig 9.** Example of shrub regeneration



**Fig 10.** Example on western defences of many fine trees





**Fig 11.** Possible outer rampart reveted by roadside wall



**Fig 12** Possible rampart to the east of Tir y Dail road

