

The sample excavation of the 'Sunken Track' at Dinefwr Park, Llandeilo



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RHIF YR ADRODDIAD / REPORT NO. 2005/30
RHIF Y PROSIECT / PROJECT RECORD NO. 53654

Mawrth 2005
March 2005

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Gan / By

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Summary

Two trenches were hand-excavated across the line of a sunken track at Dinefwr Park near Llandeilo in February 2005. The work was intended to inform the possible reuse of this track as an access route during a major programme of landscape restoration by the National Trust. The Sunken Track was found to comprise a substantial cutting into the bedrock up to 9m wide and 1.8m deep. There were suggestions that a former boundary wall had been built up against the steep western side of this cut. This appears to have been subsequently removed and, in some areas, the trackway along the base of the cutting may have been widened. The trackway itself was a well-prepared metalled surface, at least 2.2m wide, with substantial and very compact make-up layers. It is suggested that the trackway may have been built in the mid 18th century to allow access from the relocated Home Farm to the East Drive and on to Llandyfeisant Church. It is also suggested that both the trackway and the original boundary wall had been deliberately hidden from view to allow an uninterrupted vista from Newton House across the parkland.

Introduction

This report details the results of the excavation of two hand-dug excavation trenches across the line of a trackway known as the Sunken Track at Dinefwr Park, Llandeilo (Fig. 1, centred on SN 618 225). The objective was to provide information to allow the National Trust to consider the potential future use of the trackway. The work formed part of a wider project to restore and improve access to Dinefwr Park. The excavation was undertaken by Cambria Archaeology Field Section in February 2005 and conforms to a brief prepared by the National Trust Archaeologist (Plunkett-Dillon 2005).

Background

Dinefwr Park is a Grade I listed historic parkland to the west of Llandeilo in Carmarthenshire. The majority of the historic estate is currently in the ownership of the National Trust. It is a landscape of exceptional importance for its archaeology, history, parkland, ecology, geology and buildings. The Park is current the subject of a major programme of landscape restoration with the assistance of grants from WEFO (Objective One) and the Heritage Lottery Fund. The National Trust intends to restore and reinstate many of the historic paths and drives across the estate as part of this programme. This network includes a north-south track referred to as the ‘Sunken Track’, which runs for 300m from Home Farm in the north to a former intersection with the East Drive to the south. The intersection of this track with the East Drive was removed when a by-pass to a cattle grid on the main drive was established. The Sunken Way still forms the boundary between the Near Park and specifically the landscape component known as ‘Front Park,’ and the Outer Park, specifically the components known as ‘Parc Sir David’ and ‘Brick Field’ (Colvin and Moggridge 2003, Figure 14). Today this boundary is marked out by a fence-line (in fact two

fences side by side; a wire fence and an iron 'estate' fence) that runs along the eastern side of the present track at the base of the eastern, shallower slope of the cut.

Objective and Methodology

The purpose of the excavation was to characterise the nature of the Sunken Track thereby allowing the National Trust to determine the nature of potential future access along the route. Two trenches were excavated by hand and both crossed the trackway from east to west (Fig. 1). Trench 1 measured 9.4m by 1m and Trench 2 measured 8m by 1m. Both trenches were excavated to bedrock, although the lower horizons were only sample excavated in Trench 2 due to the compacted nature of the deposits.

Results

Trench 1 (Fig. 2 and Plates 1 and 2) – The overall cut for the Sunken Track was found to be 9 wide and 1.8m deep in Trench 1. The lower part of the western side of this cut comprised a steep to vertical cut into the bedrock (106) with a gentler slope to the upper profile. The base of the cut was 3.2m wide and relatively flat although it sloped slightly from west to east. The eastern edge comprised a more regular and gradual slope. The bedrock at the base of this cut was overlain by two very compact layers of rounded gravel and pebbles set into orange brown clays (105 and 104). Each of these compact layers was up to 50mm thick. They were overlain by a layer of rounded stones, forming a compact trackway surface that included a number of larger flat stones (103). This surface extended over the eastern two thirds of the base of the cut, forming a feature 2.6m wide. Over the western third of the cut for the trackway, the bedrock was overlain by a deposit of grey brown soil that contained small mortar flecks (107). This appeared to be banked up against the steep lower western edge of the trackway.

The initial surface appears to have been replaced by a second surface comprising small flat stones with occasional larger stones (102). This extended across the whole width of the cut and overlay the mortar layer, forming a trackway surface 3.4m wide. This was in turn overlain by a mixed deposit of topsoil and turf (101) that had been heavily disturbed by livestock.

It is suggested that the initial surface, represented by the lower layer of compacted pebbles (103) and its underlying make-up deposits (105 and 104), was originally associated with a boundary wall, built up against the near vertical inner slope of the Sunken Track. This appears to have been subsequently removed leaving a deposit of soil with mortar flecks (107). The later surface, represented by the upper level of compacted pebbles (102), was built over the area formerly occupied by this wall, providing a wider trackway surface.

Trench 2 (Fig. 3 and Plates 3 and 4) – The cut through the bedrock had a similar profile to that recorded in Trench 1 and was 7m wide and 1.8m deep. Again the lower part of the western side was steep to vertical with a gentler slope to the upper profile and the eastern side of the cut. The base of the cut was flat and up to 3.4m wide. The

lowermost fills were very compact. Only the westernmost half of the trench was fully excavated.

The lowermost deposit in the central area of the trench comprised a compact surface of small pebbles set into a grey brown silty clay, c 2.2m wide (207). This appeared to abut a deposit of large angular stones (205) overlying the western side of the base of the trench. Between this stony deposit and the base of the western side of the trench was a series of silty clay deposits with mortar flecks and fragments (208, 209 and 210).

The stony deposit and pebble surface (207) was overlain by a series of compact, rubble makeup levels (206 ~~and~~, 204 ~~and~~ 203) for an upper metalled surface of small rounded pebbles (203). This was overlain by larger angular flat stones with occasional bricks (202). This upper surface was also c 2.2m wide. Both these surfaces and the mortary deposits in the western part of the trench were overlain by a series of grey brown topsoil deposits (211 and 201).

The series of deposits suggests a similar sequence to that encountered in Trench 1 with traces of a boundary wall, represented by a series of deposits with mortar fragments, originally built against the lower, inner edge of the cut. The stony deposit (205) may also be remnants from the dismantling and removal of this wall. Unlike Trench 1, it seems that the later trackway surfaces (represented by 203 and 202) did not subsequently extend across the area formerly occupied by this wall.

Discussion

The excavation suggested that the feature was constructed in two phases. The first phase is represented by the substantial cut into the bedrock. This appears to be associated with a boundary wall built against the steeper western slope and a narrow metalled trackway (103 and 207). The only traces of the former wall appear to be the mortar flecks in the deposit against the inner slope of the cut. Presumably the boundary wall would not have been visible from Newton House. Therefore, it seems logical to suggest that the feature was originally conceived as a 'ha ha' allowing an uninterrupted view across the parkland. At some point the wall was removed, the surface of the trackway substantially raised to its present level and a more substantial pebble and cobble surface prepared. This seems to have involved a substantial amount of effort with the depositing of a series compacted foundation layers.

It is not clear when the Sunken Track was first established. It is marked on the Ordnance Survey 1886 map. However, it is clearly much older and it is mentioned during tree removal in the account book for 1757 (Colvin and Moggridge 2003, 33-34). In this account it is described as 'The Trench' and Colvin and Moggridge suggest that it may have been the outer boundary of the Rice family's land for some time prior to that. On the other hand, it does seem to form an obvious access route between Home Farm and the East Drive and then onto Llandyfeisant Church. Home Farm was originally located southwest of the Newton House and it was not relocated to its current site until c 1750 (Colving and Moggridge 2003, 33). It seems possible that the track was laid out at the time of this relocation. Therefore, it seems likely that the

feature initially fulfilled the dual purpose of both a trackway and a property parkland boundary. The ‘sinking’ of this boundary and trackway into a deep trench would have allowed an uninterrupted view across the landscape. It has even been suggested that the depth of the trackway would have prevented parishioners and estate staff who used the route from being seen from the house (Plunkett-Dillon 2005). However, they would have been easily visible to the north and south where the trackway cut is shallower and it is considered more likely that the requirement was just to hide the trackway itself from view. The substantial cut across the ridge was presumably to hide the boundary wall for an uninterrupted view from immediately in front of the house, and the wall, like the parishioners and estate staff, would have been visible to either side of the ridge.

George Rice did not acquire Parc Sir David to the east of the Sunken Way until 1759. It is tempting to suggest that the removal of the inner retaining wall and the raising of the trackway surface may have corresponded with it becoming largely redundant as a boundary feature after this extension to the Rice family landholdings. However, this is entirely speculative and it may be that the need to hide the trackway from view continued for some time after this date.

Acknowledgements

The excavation was led by Peter Crane with the support of Richard Ramsey and Hubert Wilson. Gwilym Hughes assisted with the backfilling. Many thanks to Emma Plunkett-Dillon (Archaeologist, National Trust) and to Paul Faulkner (National Trust Property Manager, Dinfewr Park) for the support with the fieldwork.

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Plate 1 - View of Trench 1 looking northwest. Newton House in the background



Plate 2 – Detail of western end of section in Trench 1 showing deposit with mortar flecks (107) against the near vertical cut into the bedrock



Plate 3 – View of Trench 2 looking northeast



Plate 4 – Western end of section of Trench 2 showing possible cut for robbed out wall