REPAIRS AT ST PATRICK'S CHAPEL, WHITESANDS BAY, SAM Pe012



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Repairs at St Patricks Chapel, Whitesands Bay, SAM Pe012

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SUMMARY

The Scheduled site of St Patricks Chapel, SAM Pe012, lies in a small field immediately behind the beach at Whitesands Bay. The remains of the chapel are now seen as a small, natural-looking grass covered mound and few visitors realise its significance.

A mixture of coastal erosion and visitor pressure have been damaging the monument, and Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority, with grant-aid from Cadw, have recently carried out erosion control works at this site. New signage has also been put up to try and encourage visitors to treat the site with respect.

These repairs are, however, only short term and the site remains very vulnerable to rising sea-levels and an increasing frequency of storm events.

INTRODUCTION

The site of St. Patrick's Chapel, PRN 2638, lies in a small field immediately behind the beach at Whitesands Bay, St Davids (NGR SM733272). The remains of the chapel are a Scheduled Ancient Monument (Pe012). The field in which it lies is known as Parc y Capel, and is listed as such on the tithe apportionment for St Davids parish (1838).



Figure 1: map showing the general location of St Patrick's chapel, adjacent to Whitesands Bay on the St Davids peninsula.

The chapel has been partially excavated on at least two occasions: in 1925 part of the building was uncovered (Badger and Green:1925: 87 – 121) and in 1970 excavations in the cemetery revealed several undated cist graves, one of which had a cross-carved stone as a lintel slab (Hague:1970:47). The stone was removed to Scolton Manor Museum. In the recent pan-Wales assessment of early medieval ecclesiastical sites, St Patrick's was classified as a category 'D' site – i.e. one which has possible, but unproven, early Medieval origins (Ludlow:2003:part 2). The full description is included in the Appendix.

CURRENT CONDITION

St Patrick's chapel is currently Scheduled as a late Medieval pilgrimage chapel. The site was deliberately buried in sand to ensure its long term preservation, and now appears as a grassy, natural-seeming mound. There is a small, low stone plinth which commemorates the early 20th century excavation, but there is little else to indicate that the site is not a natural part of a small sand-dune system.

In recent years, the Cadw field monument warden, along with other archaeologists, has expressed concern over the deteriorating condition of this site. The deterioration can be attributed to two causes: coastal erosion and visitor pressure.

Coastal erosion

St Patricks is set in a field behind the beach and above the reach of a normal high tide. However, in bad weather or exceptional tides, the waves break against the edge of the sand mound which covers the site. In an attempt to alleviate this problem, the National Park Authority placed large boulders along the edge of the mound to act as a breakwater and try and prevent sand being washed out. However, the sea has breached this defence in two places resulting in two erosion scars 'eating into' the Scheduled area. The most westerly of these two was a serious cause for concern, visibly expanding with each passing season. The exposed section revealed layers of sand and soil with occasional fragments of roof slate included.

Visitor pressure

The Pembrokeshire Coast Path National Trail passes along the northern side of Parc y Capel. This section of the Trail is exceptionally heavily used, with Whitesands Beach being one of the most visited in the National Park. The National Trail itself is just outside the Scheduled Area, but an unofficial path leads straight across the mound of St Patrick's.

Since there are no fences or barriers, Parc y Capel is also used almost as an extension of Whitesands Beach with people picnicking and sunbathing in the field and, frequently, on the chapel mound. In themselves these activities do not appear to be any cause for concern, however, more damaging is the fact that the mound is often used as a campsite, and on numerous visits during 2004 – 5 there were new fire-pits and barbecues dug into the mound and the surrounding area. The area is also often left covered with litter.



Figure 2: location of the Scheduled Area, the National Trail and breaches in the sea defences.



Picture 1: Parc y Capel, viewed from the car park at Whitesands Bay. The gentle mound in the foreground is the chapel mound – most visitors to the site are unaware of its existence.



Picture 2: The low stone plinth marking the site of the altar, as discovered in the early twentieth century excavations.



Picture 3: The western breach through the sea defences.



Picture 4: The smaller, but developing, eastern breach in the sea defences.



Picture 5 (above left): the exposed section within the erosion scar. Layers of sand and soil were revealed, along with fragments of roofing slate and beach pebbles. Picture 6 (above right): after days when the beach has been busy there is frequently litter left in Parc y Capel.



Pictures 7 and 8 (above and below): some of the damage caused by unofficial campsites and barbecues on the chapel mound itself.



PROPOSED MANAGEMENT: OPTIONS AND CONCERNS

A simple scheme was proposed for mitigation against the active coastal erosion. Consent was obtained from Cadw to use a mini-digger to replace the boulders which had been lost where the sea had breached the defences. The gap behind the boulder line could then be filled in with a suitable sand and soil mixture and re-turfed. Although this would not stop future erosion, it would slow the process and provide sacrificial erosion material, hopefully preventing the erosion reaching the archaeological layers within the mound.

A more difficult problem to solve is the visitor pressure exerted on this site. Three options were considered, and discussed with Cadw and with the National Park Authority:

1. To fence the site off, leaving access to the beach in front of the chapel site, and leaving access along the National Trail behind the site.

Merits: will ensure that the site is not damaged in the future

Problems: Future management – who will ensure that the vegetation within the fenced area is kept under control?

Public perception: people are used to having access to this land, and will not welcome it being taken away, especially as the majority of users are not causing any damage to the site.

Landscape: Fencing immediately behind the beach would have an adverse aesthetic impact on this landscape.

2. To leave the site unfenced but attempt to discourage people damaging the site by placing boulders or low posts around the chapel mound, and putting up a sign explaining the nature and significance of the site.

Merits: Less visible impact than fencing, but still marking out the physical limit of the chapel.

Encouraging people to understand and value the site, and therefore to respect it. Retains open access to Parc y Capel

Problems: Safety concerns: in order for the posts/boulders to be small enough to have a negligible visible impact, they may also be small enough to be a triphazard for the many visitors to the site. This field is so well used, and by such a range of people (the elderly, disabled visitors and people with pushchairs, for example) that physical barriers, however small, may present a real problem for some visitors.

Extent of area to be marked out: whilst it is possible to establish the extent and position of the chapel itself through excavation reports, the extent of the cemetery is unknown. Archaeologically, it would make no sense to define the area of the chapel as a 'vulnerable' area without also including the cemetery. There were concerns that such an approach may end up being counter-productive, perhaps implying that the undefined area outside the chapel 'did not matter' and could tolerate ground disturbance.

3. To leave the site unfenced, as above, and put an explanatory sign on the entrance to the field highlighting the significance and nature of the site. *Merits:* No visible landscape impact.

Encouraging people to understand and value the site, and therefore to respect it. Retains open access to Parc y Capel.

Problems: No physical barrier: this method would rely solely on people respecting the site and its nature.

In the end, option 3 was decided upon for two main reasons: The National Park Authority were anxious to avoid causing any detrimental visible impacts in this fragile – and well-known – landscape. This method had the lowest physical impact and required the least future maintenance. It could therefore be considered the 'first step' in future management, with monitoring throughout the high season over 2 - 3 years to assess its impact. If there is little or no improvement, then a decision can be taken regarding whether to implement a higher impact regime.

METHODOLOGY AND PHOTOGRAPHIC RECORD

The work was carried out on a dry day in February 2006, and was monitored by the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Archaeologist. A sheet of the geo-textile 'Terram' was pinned over the surface of the erosion to act as a marker for future monitoring. The digger driver first of all replaced the boulders into the breach, and then filled in behind them with sand and soil imported from a nearby farm.

The sand/soil mix was chosen carefully to match what was already present in order that no 'foreign' seeds or vegetation would be imported into this habitat. Strips of turf were laid over the top of the infill – again, these were taken from a farm nearby with a very similar habitat. This will not only ensure that the vegetation, when recovered, will blend in with what is already present, but should also give it the best possible chance of survival, as only plants adapted for this harsh sea-side environment are being introduced. The digger avoided driving over the chapel mound as far as was possible. At times, this was unavoidable, but the very dry ground meant that the vehicle caused no damage to the ground surface.

The work was photographed as it was carried out, see below.

A reconstruction drawing of the chapel was commissioned to go on the sign (see photograph below). Planning and budgetary constraints meant that a full interpretation panel was not possible at this site, nor would it necessarily have been desirable. The sign was fabricated in aluminium and placed onto the fence adjacent to the entrance to Parc y Capel. The effectiveness of this approach will be monitored over 2-3 seasons, and if there is a notable decrease in the amount of damage caused by visitors and campers then the sign will be replaced in a more robust (and expensive!) material.

In addition to the physical works carried out as described above, some 'awareness-raising' has also been attempted to try and give the site a higher profile. A presentation was given to the lifeguards and attendants who work at the beach in the hope that they would, therefore, recognise the need to prevent damage at the site and pass this information on to visitors. Over time it is hoped that the monument will assume a much greater local importance. A leaflet/handout about the site is also planned, which will be available from the Whitesands Bay café. Picture 9: a sheet of Terram was pegged into place and weighted down before the work began. This will act as a marker to monitor future erosion problems. The geotextile is water-permeable, so should not affect vegetation growth.

Picture 10 and 11 (above and below): Working from the replaced large boulders into the breach in the sea defe	ne be ences

each side, the digger i.,

Picture 12: with the main breach now infilled with large boulders, the gap behind the boulders was filled up with sand and soil sourced from a nearby farm. A mat of appropriate vegetation, again locally sourced, was then laid over the top of the infill.



Picture 14. The view from Whitesands Beach towards St Patrick's Chapel. 7	٢ł

Picture 14. The view from Whitesands Beach towards St Patrick's Chapel. This picture was taken immediately after the repair was completed, before the vegetation had taken root. It also shows very clearly how great the negative impact of fencing would be in this landscape, and how vulnerable this site will be to rising sea-levels in the future.



Picture 15. The sign which has been put up on the entrance way to the field. It is hoped that by giving people some information about the significance of the site, some of the unintentional damage will be reduced. The reconstruction drawing is designed to make it easier for people to view the field as a significant place.



Picture 16. The new sign in position – it is clearly visible to everyone entering the field.

FUTURE MANAGEMENT AND MONITORING

In the short-medium term, the effectiveness of these repairs will be monitored during site visits at different times of year, from the peak of the summer season through to the middle of winter. Both the physical repairs (to the erosion scars) and the visitor damage will be monitored. If the management proves to be effective (i.e. if the visitor pressure on the site is eased) then the sign will be replaced with one fabricated in a more robust material. If the management is not working, then some form of physical demarcation of the archaeologically sensitive area will be considered.

In the long term, this site is exceptionally vulnerable to the threat posed by both rising sea-levels and an increasing frequency of storm events. A decision needs to be taken as to the appropriate long-term management of this site – it may be that preservation by record is the only realistic answer, and large scale excavation would therefore be needed.

Preliminary results from the monitoring over the first season (summer 2006) suggest that there has been a noticeable improvement in the condition of the site, as compared to the end of the season in 2005. There is still some evidence of disturbance (two small stone-ringed hearths were noticed, as well as some scarring of the grass surface from disposable barbecues). However, the instances of digging into the mound appear to have been reduced, and it was this activity which was causing the most concern.

SOURCES

Badger, BA and Green, F: Excavations at the chapel attributed to St Patrick: 1925: Archaeologia Cambrensis vol. 5, p. 87-120. Hague, DB: 1970: Archaeology in Wales, no.10: 27 – 28 Ludlow: 2003: Early Medieval Ecclesiastical Sites project, Part 2: PRN 46864

Unpublished report held by Cambria Archaeology.

Tithe apportionment: 1838: Parish of St. Davids and the Cathedral Close

APPENDIX

Full report description of St Patricks Chapel, taken from the Early Medieval Ecclesiastical Sites project (Ludlow:2003):

"Early Medieval D site – i.e. possible early medieval origins. Site of late medieval pilgrimage chapel to St Davids, in sand-dunes just above Whitesands Bay. The chapel was mentioned by George Owen in the late 16th century, when it was 'wholly decayed' (RCAHM 1925:332). Though it may appear that the site is post-Conquest in origin, on the pilgrims' route to St Davids, which reaches its peak after the Papal Bull of 1123 (James 1993), the association between St Patrick and St Davids is implicit from an early date and had become formalised by the late 11th century (Edwards forthcoming). The chapel may therefore occupy an early medieval site.

The foundations of the chapel could still be traced in 1925, in a field called Park Capel (RCAHM 1925,332). They measured c.10m x c.3m, orientated ESE. The site was excavated, rather poorly, in 1924 (ibid.). In 1970, trenches were dug in the cemetery after cist graves had been observed eroding from the ground. Three burials were revealed, two of them cist graves (Hague, 1970, 27-8). They were not dated but one of the cists employed a cross-carved stone of uncertain date as a lintel (PRN 47479), suggesting that it was late pre-conquest, or more likely post-Conquest.

The area has been artificially buried beneath sand, for protection, and now appears as an irregular grassy mound c.50m in diameter. In a central depression is a plaque commemorating the 1924 excavation. The W side of the mound has been subject to wave erosion and is now defended by large boulders. Visitor erosion has worn pathways elsewhere on the mound, and the Pembrokeshire Coast Path skirts its east side. A large area of its surrounds are scheduled. NDL 2003"

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Paratowyd yr adroddiad hwn gan / This report has been prepared by Polly Groom

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Yn unol â'n nôd i roddi gwasanaeth o ansawdd uchel, croesawn unrhyw sylwadau sydd gennych ar gynnwys neu strwythur yr adroddiad hwn

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