

# Nevern Castle Excavations

## Interim Report 2016 Summer Excavations

### Introduction

This was the tenth season of work at Nevern Castle; a three week excavation (June 26<sup>th</sup> – July 15<sup>th</sup>) directed by Dr Chris Caple (Durham University) with deputy director Pete Crane (Independent Archaeologist), supervisors Feenagh Johnson, Chris Chinnock and finds supervisor Aja Cooper working with students from Durham University as well as many local volunteers. The excavation was supported by the estate of the late Ray Caple, Durham University and The Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority. The objectives for this season's excavation were: to expose and excavate the Great Hall (Trench SB), to further investigate the motte construction in particular the ditch protecting the motte (Trench FE), resolve the route of the wooden palisade on the northern bank and motte (Trench FD) and examine the relationship between the motte and bank construction and the early 12<sup>th</sup> century occupation (Trench FH), see Figure 1. We had also initially hoped to cut a section across the west ditch (Trench U), but due to the waterlogged condition of the ground we could not safely excavate and so did not proceed with this trench.

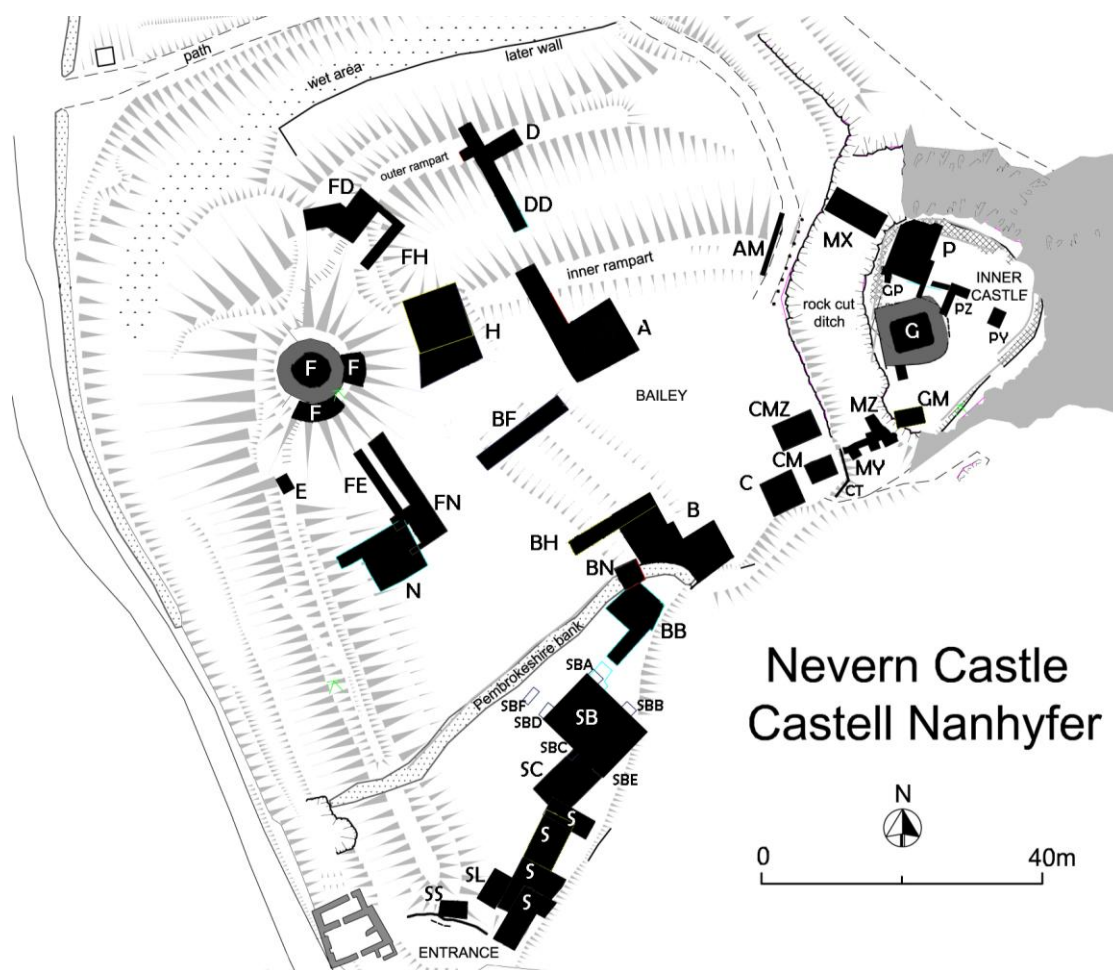


Figure 1: Location of the Excavated Trenches 2008-2016 depicted accurately on the RCAHMW survey of the site – courtesy of Will Davies and Louise Barker

## History

The existing historical record indicates that Nevern and the surrounding cantref of Cemais was under the control of the local Welsh lord Cuhelyn, prior to its capture by Robert FitzMartin in the Anglo-Norman conquest of Pembrokeshire 1108-1110. FitzMartin created Nevern as the caput for his barony of Cemais, the motte on this site is almost certainly part of the castle he established. He is also recorded, by the sixteenth century historian George Owen, as founding a town of 18 burgage plots on this site and establishing the abbey of St Dogmaels. Welsh attacks of the castle at Cilgerran, capturing Nest, in 1109 and the attacks on Llandoverly, Swansea and Narbeth castles in 1116 demonstrate the need for a castle with substantial defences. In 1136, following the battle of Crug Mawr, Welsh forces recaptured Ceredigion; this may have given them control of much of northern Pembrokeshire including Nevern, though there is no written evidence to indicate who controlled Nevern and Cemais between 1136 and the 1170s. The conflict between Stephan and Matilda for the English crown meant few resources were available for Anglo Norman lords to retake their Welsh lands until the 1150s. From 1156 much of West Wales was under the control of the Welsh leader Rhys ap Gruffydd (the Lord Rhys). Lands and castles were returned to their Anglo-Norman lords in 1158, though since Robert FitzMartin died in 1159 and his son William was still a minor, the extent to which the FitzMartin's exercised control at Nevern in this period is uncertain. Subsequently, in 1165, the Lord Rhys recaptured Cardigan and Cilgerran castles and associated lands and it is probable that Nevern again came under his control. In 1171, after reaching agreement with Henry II, the Lord Rhys was given the rank of Justiciar and allowed to retain his ancestral lands of Deheubarth but required to return all other lands to their Anglo-Norman lords. It is highly likely that soon after 1171 the ownership of Nevern castle passed back to William FitzMartin (Robert's son) who married Angharad, the daughter of the Lord Rhys around this time. In 1191, following the death of Henry II in 1189 and the departure of William FitzMartin on crusade with Richard I, the Lord Rhys captured Nevern Castle ignoring his earlier promises not to do so. Control of the castle then swapped back and forth between the Lord Rhys and a number of his sons (Hywel Sais, Gruffydd and Maelgwn), with the Lord Rhys being held prisoner in the castle by his sons during 1194, before his death in 1197. It is recorded that in 1195 Hywel Sais slighted Nevern Castle to prevent it falling into Anglo-Norman hands and by 1204 Anglo-Norman forces had retaken control of north Pembrokeshire including Nevern. A new castle and borough were established in Newport by 1204 and Nevern Castle disappears from the written record.

Excavations at Nevern Castle have taken place every year since 2008 (Interim Reports available on: <https://www.dur.ac.uk/archaeology/research/projects/all/?mode=project&id=405> ).

Archaeology has revealed that a castle was built at Nevern of earth and timber in the early 12<sup>th</sup> century, initially a small bank and ditch protecting forming a promontory fort (a conquest castle) (Phase 3) later a motte with substantial banks and ditches forming a castle on the western side of the site and defended town on the eastern side (Phase 4). This was rebuilt in clay mortared slate during the mid to late 12<sup>th</sup> century (Phase 6 and 7a&b). The castle was then set on fire and demolished (Phase 7b), presumably the 'slighting' of the castle in 1195 by Hywel Sais. The site was subsequently looted for building stone and from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century was used for agriculture (Phase 8), which ploughed away much of the archaeological evidence in the centre of the site. The surviving remains of Nevern Castle do however preserve valuable evidence of life in 12<sup>th</sup> century Wales and the site shows that rare transition stage of the late 12<sup>th</sup> century when castles throughout the principality were being redeveloped from earth and timber into stone.

## Excavations 2016

### Early 12<sup>th</sup> Century Earth and Timber Castle

#### Trench FH

An area 7 x 1.5m was excavated on the southern slope of the juncture between the north bank and the motte (Figure 1). This revealed a complex sequence of construction events shown in the

composite section Figure 2. Some form of structure had been created where the motte later stood which cut through the natural soil (FH27), piling up the removed earth (FH22) onto the ground surface (FH25) so burying it between two identical soil deposits. A shallow ditch was then excavated around this early feature; the cut of this ditch is seen as FH29. Subsequently weathering filled the ditch and covered the surrounding earth with a thick layer of clay and soil (F21), possibly an internal bank of the natural soil weathering away into the shallow ditch and beyond. It is possible this is earlier Welsh occupation activity. Subsequently a large clay structure (FH12), either a feature connected with the early perimeter clay bank of the conquest castle or possibly the motte and associated works, was constructed. This was cut (FH30) down to the subsoil, though elsewhere we know the motte was built directly on the ploughed soil (Trench FN, 2015 Interim). An occupation earth (FH19) was formed on top of the earlier clay soil deposit (F21); this was the same early occupation earth we have seen in the previous year inside the bank of the early conquest castle. Subsequently a clay layer (FH18) was deposited and embedded on top of that was a layer of slates (FH10) which quickly became worn and rounded suggesting a heavily used surface. No post holes or other evidence of a structure were recovered. Subsequently the substantial north clay bank (FH7) was erected burying the traces of this earliest castle occupation. At a later date, after the wooden palisade phase on the bank had been constructed and removed, see Trench FD, a north – south ditch, cut (FH15), was dug into the bank (FH7) around the base of the earlier motte. This appears to be a defence for the motte, cutting it off from the northern bank. A series of layers were subsequently deposited in this ditch FH23, FH30, FH28, FH14, FH13 and FH24, many of these layers contained traces of charcoal suggesting they formed during a period of castle occupation. A slate layer (FH14) was also present in the ditch (FH15) many of the slates showed evidence of having been shaped and used. The nature of these deposits suggest that the filling of the ditch occurred during the mid to late 12<sup>th</sup> century. Subsequently debris and clay deposits (FH6, FH8 and FH9) spilled down the motte, almost certainly associated with the late 12<sup>th</sup> century slighting of the castle and the subsequent decay of the ruin. A brown soil (FH3) formed slowly over the unfarmed area of the site, this was cut away in this area when it was used as a driveway during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century (Trench FD 2015 Interim Report) leading to the deposition of FH5 containing traces of coal and ceramic fragments, before the site returned to pasture (FH2, FH1).

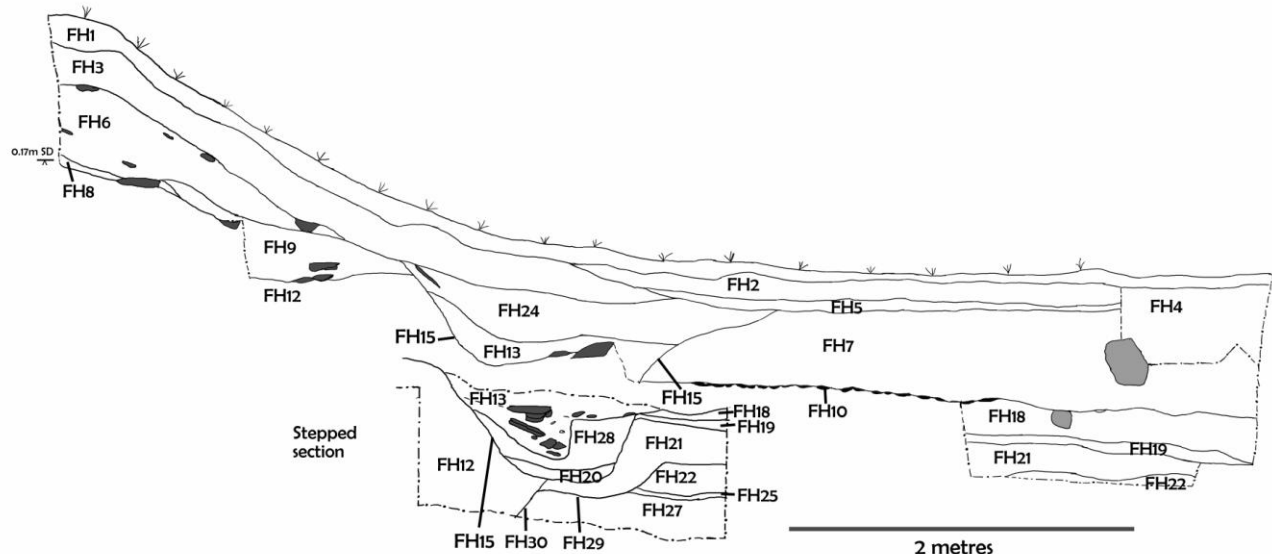


Figure 2: Trench FH - Composite Section, south facing sections

#### Trench FD

The 7 x 4m trench, originally opened in 2015 and backfilled over the winter, was uncovered and excavation resumed. A further area, 5m x 3m running at 30° to the main line of trench FD on the north side of the motte, was excavated, initially with a machine and then later by hand. This was done in order to determine the line of the palisade trench seen running in this direction in

2015. Problems in detecting the different layers within the clay of the bank and motte meant that stratigraphic excavation often proved impossible. Consequently a series of boxes were cut through the clay bank and motte deposits which enabled us to see the features in section, often the only way they could be seen and recorded (Figure 3). A box FD75 (1.8 x 2.0m) was excavated through the palisade slot previously identified in the FD trench, to the west of the box FD18 cut through this feature in 2015. Boxes FD76 and FD77 were cut into the clay of the motte, Figure 4.



Figure 3: Palisade Slot in Section

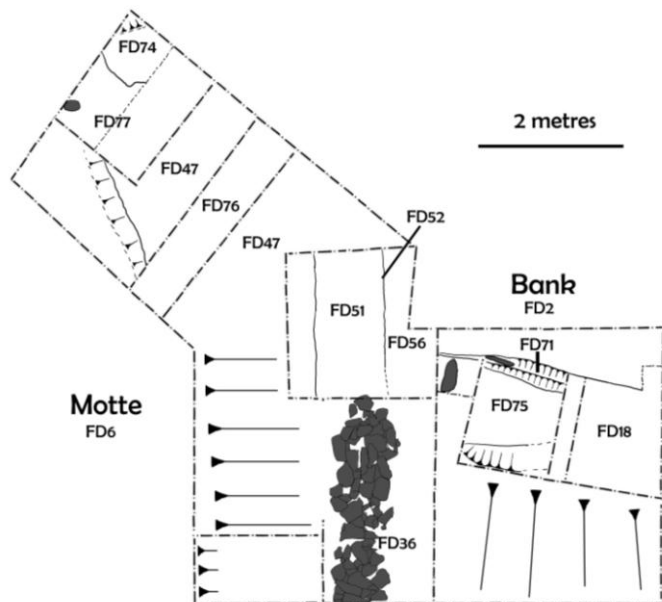


Figure 4: Plan of the Trench FD

Results from trenches FH and D suggest that after the construction of an initial colonisation castle, the motte (FD6) and the large north bank (FD2, FD56) were built. Subsequently a palisade slot (FD71) was cut into the top of the bank and slates used to hold a series of large palisade timbers in place. Later the palisade timbers were dug out and the slot filled with a clay soil (FD69, FD68, FD57, FD54) which was barely distinguishable from the surrounding bank, save for small slates present in the fill and often located around the sides and base of the slot (Figure 3). It seems likely that this removal occurred when the defences were abandoned circa 1135. Whatever replaced the wooden palisade was also dug out (FD66) at a later date and the trench refilled (FD65, FD49). Possibly a short lived wooden fence palisade when the castle was reoccupied in the mid 12<sup>th</sup> century. Subsequently this was replaced with a clay mortared slate wall slightly later in the mid 12<sup>th</sup> century when the castle was fully redeveloped into stone. At the start of this redevelopment into stone the motte was lowered to facilitate a large round tower (tower F) being constructed on it. The presence of a shoulder on the otherwise symmetrical cone shaped motte, at the place where the north bank joins it may suggest that this is where the displaced top of the motte material was located. The clay of the shoulder (FD47, FD46) is identical to the motte construction material but contains occasional lenses of large slate such as FD44, unrelated to any other feature, save the motte construction / alteration. This may also explain the previously unearthed irregular lens of slate FD24 found in 2015 and a further layer of clay found on the bank (FD67). This motte alteration activity appears to have obscured the line of the earlier removed palisade and the relationship between the bank and the ditch. Though the absence of any detectable junction encourages the idea that the bank and motte were built together in a single construction phase, this displaced motte material makes it difficult to have any confidence in such interpretations. Subsequently a ditch (FD52), also seen as FH15, was dug, running north - south across the junction between the motte and the bank, just east of the shoulder. This may have been part of an additional defence to prevent easy access for the north bank up onto the motte. Subsequently this ditch was filled with clay washed down from the



motte / shoulder and charcoal, (FD63, FD61, FD51) suggesting that this filling occurred during the mid to late 12<sup>th</sup> century occupation of the castle. A layer of slate (FD 36), (also seen as FH14), derived from buildings as some of the slates were shaped or contained holes and may derive from the castle destruction of 1195. Certainly after further clay deposits filled (FD60, FD53) the ditch, the whole area was subject to an undisturbed slow silting process leading to a thick deposit of clay material (FD5) seemingly washed down from the motte. On the motte occasional slates (FD45, FD48) lay parallel to the sloping sides of the motte, under layer FD5. Such deposits correspond with the abandonment of the site and occasional slates falling off the ruined round tower and ending up part way down the slope of the motte. Subsequently during the agricultural exploitation of the site in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century remains of the slate curtain wall were dug out from the top of the bank and the slates reused for making cottages, Pembrokeshire banks or boundary walls (FD14). The resultant ditch was refilled (FD64) a layer of slate fragments (FD23) all that remains of the earlier curtain wall.

### Trench FE

A trench 12.5m x 1.5m was excavated against the south side of the motte, approx 0.7m west of trench FN (2015). In the centre of the trench, a 6.5m wide ditch protecting the motte, Figure 5, first encountered in Trench FN (2015) was uncovered. This year we attempted to reach the bottom of this ditch, shoring the trench as we went down. We reached a depth of 3m below the present surface and stopped. Though we did not bottom the ditch, which is probably nearly another metre in depth, we had reached the waterlogged silts (FE50) which filled the base of the ditch. From these deposits we recovered a particularly coarse type of pottery, many pieces of waterlogged wood; branches, twigs and woodworking waste as well as a leather shoe. This deposit, rich with occupation material, derived from the early castle occupation circa 1108-1135. Above it there was a thick layer of orange clay (FE48), material washed into the ditch, probably the result of a period of erosion, building or abandonment. It could for instance derive from the reduction of the motte at the start of the reoccupation or construction of clay mortared slate structures in the mid 12<sup>th</sup> century.

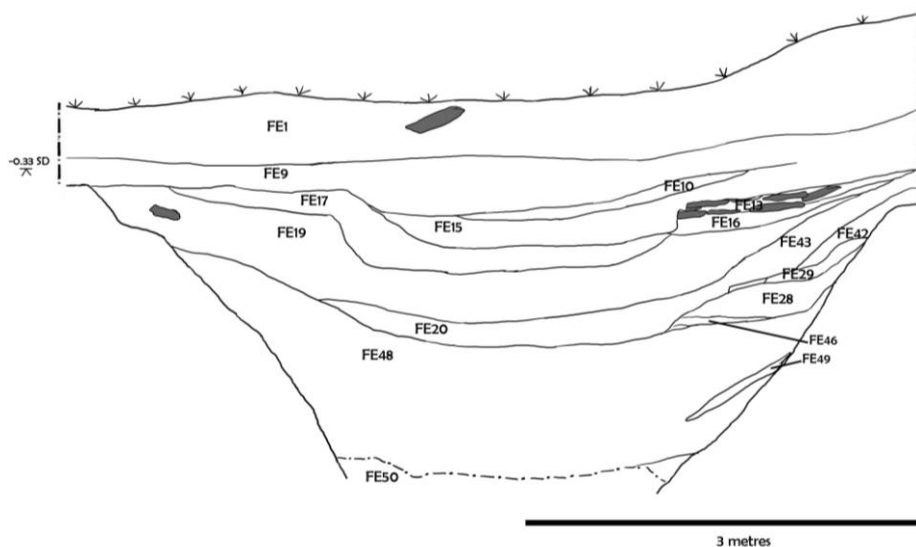


Figure 5: Trench FE; East Facing Section, through the ditch and motte deposits

The later castle occupation of the mid to late 12<sup>th</sup> century was again marked with dark soil, slates and occupation material (FE17, FE19) ending with the deposition of orange clay (FE16) and a layer of large slates (FE13) (previously been used in a building?) deposits which almost certainly derive from the slighting of the castle, especially the round tower (F) on the motte, in 1195. The subsequent slow silting of the ditch was influenced by the later post medieval agricultural activity on the site (FE9), which removed the stratification of the fill layers in the upper levels of the ditch. This sequence would suggest that though this ditch was initially an important defensive feature associated with the Phase 4 motte construction, subsequently it clogged up with the debris of

occupation and later the infilling with clay which meant the ditch had ceased to have significant defensive role by the mid to late 12<sup>th</sup> century. No evidence of re-cutting or fortification was uncovered. The presence of a number of sherds of high fired, decorative, glazed Bristol wares of 12<sup>th</sup> century date, recovered in both this season and in 2015, from the upper levels of the ditch (FE9, FE17), would suggest that by the late 12<sup>th</sup> century, there was high status occupation in the round tower on the motte.

At the south end of the trench, the archaeological deposits had been largely ploughed out; plough marks (FE24) were just visible in the subsoil (FE3) beneath a thick rich agricultural soil (FE9). Cut into the subsoil were the tips of 2 clear stakeholes (FE38/9, FE34/5) as well possible traces of up to 5 others. These indicate that there were once wooden structures here, probably related to building or occupation in the early castle, though few traces now remain. Similar stakeholes were seen in the adjoining trenches FN (2015) and N (2010). Considered together these suggest that there was no counter-scarp bank on the south side of the motte protection ditch. In the late medieval period a pit (FE21, FE26, FE25) was dug down into the subsoil and the edge of the ditch deposits. This was also encountered in Trench FN in 2015. It produced pottery of the 13<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century, though ploughing activity meant that many of the distinctive pieces of pottery come from the ploughsoil (FE9) and topsoil (FE1). Since this was virtually the only place on the site where these types of ceramics were encountered, we can be confident that they originally derived from this pit. Its presence in this unusual location would suggest that there was no awareness of the ditch in the high-late medieval period. Its presence also accounts for the vertical face of the south end of the ditch uncovered in 2015.

The north end of the trench had been cut down through the motte, revealing a similar sequence of construction deposits to that seen in trench FN in 2015. Above a very pale demineralised soil horizon (FE47), which in contrast to 2015 showed no marks of ploughing, there was a dump of clay (FE44) topped by a layer of slate (FE8). As with FN8 in 2015, this layer of slate was thicker at the outer edge of the motte than the inside, possibly positioned to indicate the extent of the motte to its early builders. Whilst these slates showed no evidence of use (no holed roof slates), the presence of broken gritstones amongst the slates indicate that this was not a deposit of natural quarried slate e.g. from the base of a ditch. Its presence beneath the motte, early in the construction sequence is also unusual, indicating the slate and stone was on the surface before the clay started to be excavated from the ditch to form the motte. The most likely interpretation of this slate deposit (FE8, FN8) is that it derives from a demolished early building, wall or cairn, presumably of Welsh construction; possibly the dwarf walls that supported a wooden building with a thatch roof. Above this deposit the motte was composed of a clay and slate layer (FE7) followed by a substantial layer of orange clay (FE6) topped by a looser packed layer of smashed slates and clay (FE5). These bands of material would have given the motte a horizontal banded appearance similar to that shown on the Bayeux tapestry for the newly erected motte at Hastings.

### Mid – Late 12<sup>th</sup> Century Stone Castle

#### Trench SB

A 9.5 x 11.5m trench was initially opened up to locate the smaller trenches SBA – SBF, previously excavated in 2014 and to uncover the walls of the Great Hall. Once the tops of these walls were revealed, excavation was concentrated within the Great Hall; an area 6.2 x 9.5m. On the basis of the evidence from the earlier trenches SBB and SBE it had been believed that most of the southern wall of this hall was missing, fallen or pushed down the slope, following the slighting of the castle. However, this year's excavation uncovered most of this back wall (SB3) still in place, though in some areas it was only a single stone high. After excavating the refilled 2014 excavation trenches, removing the topsoil (SB1) and a recently formed agricultural soil (SB2), the site was seen to be covered in the debris of demolition (SB7), almost certainly the destruction of the castle in 1195. Cut into this were:

- soil filled ruts of a cart track (SB17/16, SB15/14). The ruts were formed by the iron rimmed wheels of a cart cutting down through the destruction debris. These even sliced through the clay mortared slate west wall of the Great Hall (SB5) at an acute angle. These ruts

subsequently filled with a soft brown agricultural soil. The cart had presumably come onto this part of the site in the 18<sup>th</sup>/19<sup>th</sup> century to fetch slate and gritstone blocks from the ruins of the Great Hall, probably to build one or more of the cottages in the area.

- a series of post holes (SB8/9, SB29, SB30/50) and slate filled pit (SB 36/49) cut into a clay filled (SB33) larger pit, which appears to have been cut down into the centre of the west wall of the Great Hall. This may well have been the site of the original entrance to the hall and thus the location of fine grained gritstone blocks, which were robbed out in the post medieval period and the resultant hole filled with these deposits.

The destruction deposit (SB7) had been ploughed flat during later agricultural activity. Many large slates and shaped gritstones had been removed, leaving a deposit composed largely of medium sized damaged slate often showing evidence of burning. The fact that it was overlain with an agricultural soil (SB2) rich in fragments of largely 19<sup>th</sup> century pottery, almost certainly derived from manuring the fields with the dung heaps from a farmyard, would suggest that there was a deliberate period of stone clearance (with the iron rimmed wheeled cart) followed by ploughing or hand digging as this area was used for growing crops. The agricultural soil in this area is much shallower than the rest of the site, and it may have only been used for a short period of time, possibly just the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Land previously ignored as too stony brought briefly into cultivation. Beneath the slate debris of destruction there was a thin soil; the occupation debris in the hall prior to its destruction and fine material from the destruction process (SB26). There were few finds suggesting that the building was fairly clean (looted / stripped) when set ablaze and then slighted. However the recovery of shattered fragments of architectural stonework, including a roll moulding and a large iron strap hinge indicate that this hall was originally a high status building. Beneath the destruction a compacted clay and slate floor (SB28, SB39) was uncovered, into which had been cut a series of postholes (SB300-308) and numerous stakeholes (SB310-404) all of which had soft brown soil fills (SB100-108, SB110-204). These were all excavated and their location plotted (Figure 6.

(i)

(ii)

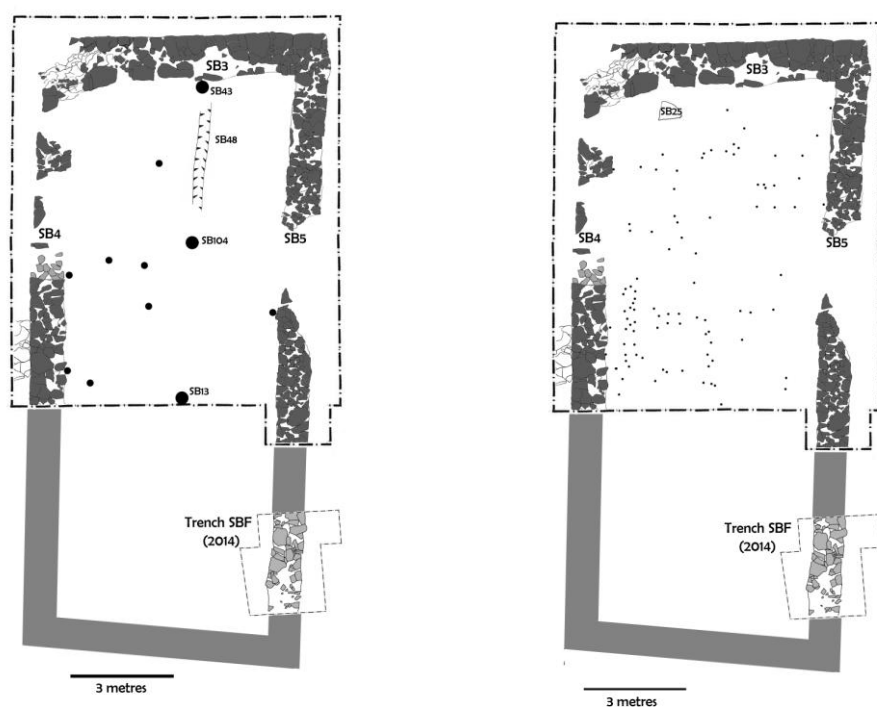


Figure 6: Plans of The Great Hall and Trench SB, showing the (i) postholes and (ii) stakeholes cut into the late 12<sup>th</sup> century floor of the Great Hall.

One of the stakeholes (cut SB338, fill SB138) was present in the fill of a beam slot, running between two large postholes (SB43, SB104/304). This would suggest at least two phases of internal wooden construction are seen within this building; larger posts with divisions based on beam seatings for wooden walls running between them which were replaced by numerous structures built with small stakes. A line of larger posts can be seen running down the centre of the hall (Figure 6i). Whilst some stakeholes appear to form lines suggesting wattle and daub walls (Figure 6ii), other groups suggest drying frames, vertical looms or other wooden structures anchored to the floor. Over 100 post and stakeholes does suggest a building filled in this later phase with wooden structures. It does not appear to be acting as a large open hall at this date, but rather a building subdivided for different groups or individuals to live in, or within in which different activities took place. Having recorded this evidence of occupation, the floor and its associated stakeholes were removed. Beneath it another floor SB41 was found, though there was evidence of a brown soil, an occupation earth, (SB40) on this floor. There were also a series of patching or repair deposits (SB47, SB46) apparently repairing slumping in this floor. As the excavation and recording of the stakeholes had taken up so much time, we had to close and backfill this trench. We plan to reopen it in 2017 to complete the excavation of this 12<sup>th</sup> century Great Hall.

## Conclusion

Despite the rainy conditions, again we achieved a significant amount of archaeology in the 3 weeks of this year's excavation. I am grateful for the sheer amount of hard work which everyone put in. We are making significant advances in our understanding of the development of this castle. The picture which emerges from this seasons work speaks of:

An early colonisation castle (low bank and ditch, circa 1108-1116) protecting a large invasion force, which built up a layer of occupation debris and now has surfaces associated with it. The motte may have been built as part of this castle or in the later phase with big banks and ditches (circa 1116-35). It was probably built over the demolished remains of an earlier Welsh slate structure which may have had a shallow encircling ditch. The motte was a highly protected location, with a ditch 6.5m wide and approx 4m deep separating it from the rest of the castle to the south. Wooden buildings were present in the castle bailey, its residents cooking food in coarse pottery, working wood and wearing leather shoes. To the east of the castle was a town / settlement protected with substantial defences, the north bank of which was surmounted with a large wooden palisade. At a later point (possibly after a period of abandonment in which the wooden palisade was removed) a smaller fence was erected, but this too was removed when the motte was reduced and clay mortared slate buildings and defences, a round tower, curtain walls and a Great Hall, were erected. This rebuilding encompassed the whole site and took some time, with several rebuilding phases. The motte and its round tower were protected from access via the north bank through the construction of a new shallow ditch. The earlier large ditch separating the motte from the bailey was by now half filled with debris and used as rubbish dump. By the later 12<sup>th</sup> century the round tower on the motte had become a lordly residence, its occupants using fine glazed ceramics, whilst the Great Hall, originally an impressive building with roll moulding decoration around its entrance and substantial wooden doors with large iron strap hinges had, in the last phase of its use, been filled with wooden structures. After the fire and destruction of the castle (1195), the debris was looted for building stone, even the curtain walls on the bank being dug out and the slate reused in the post medieval period. Though much of the site was used for agriculture in the 17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century, the area south of the Pembrokeshire bank, where most of the late 12<sup>th</sup> century stone structures had been located, was only stripped of stone in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, subsequently hand dug or ploughed and crops grown.

Dr Chris Caple – July 2016

A Partnership of –



Nevern Community  
Council



Pembrokeshire Coast  
National Park



Durham University  
Dept of Archaeology