

Nevern Castle Excavations

Interim Report 2018 Easter Excavations

Introduction

This was the twelfth season of work at Nevern Castle; a single week excavation (April 8th – April 13th) directed by Dr Chris Caple (Durham University) with supervisor Adam Mead, students, Amanda, Chelsea and Mike from Durham University and Delun Gibby from The Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority. 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 week's excavation were to expose and excavate the top of the west bank revealing and recording any archaeological features which might be lost when a section is cut through the bank in the summer. We were particularly concerned to find any remaining traces of late 12th century defensive structures which might have originally existed on top of the bank, such as a curtain wall or any wooden palisade which might have preceded it.

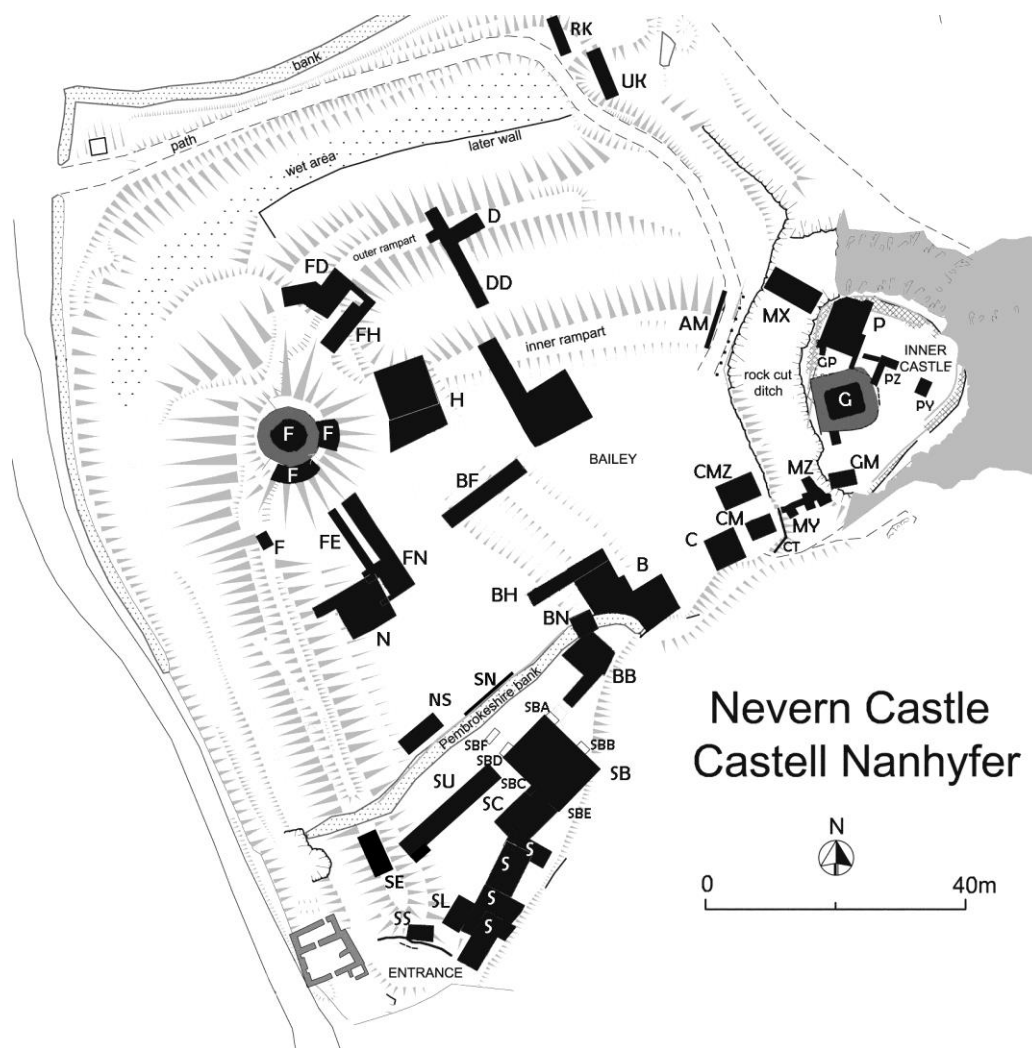


Figure 1: Location of the Excavated Trenches 2008-2018, including Trenches SE and SN excavated at Easter 2018.

History & Previous Archaeology

Excavations at Nevern Castle have taken place every year since 2008. Interim Reports which provide a summary of the history of the site and details of each season's excavations are available on: <https://www.dur.ac.uk/archaeology/research/projects/all/?mode=project&id=405>.

Excavations Easter 2018

Trench SE

An area 5 x 3m was initially opened up on the top of the west bank. This was quickly expanded to an area 6.5m x 3.5 to take account of the damage being done to the existing archaeological features by vegetation. The removal of the topsoils (SE1, SE2), degraded bank material (SE3) and features such as animal burrows and a modern stake hole (SE4/5, SE8, SE9, SE10 and SE6/7) revealed the upper surface of the medieval bank. This had been heavily eroded and robbed of stone in the past, consequently all trace of the curtain wall had gone. There was also no evidence for a palisade slot or postholes cut into the top of the bank. This means either over a metre of material has weathered off the top of the bank, or there was no preceding wooden defence. Traces of all these features were recovered from the top of the north bank of the castle in 2010 Easter, 2015, 2016 and 2017 excavations. A couple of fragments of post medieval pottery were recovered from SE2 and SE3.

In the top of the late 12th century bank construction deposits were a pair of stakeholes (SE12/13 and SE14/15), whose fill matched those of other postholes from the medieval period. Their size and orientation indicate that they would have supported a non-defensive feature on the top of the bank. Excavation through the bank material revealed its method of construction. Initially a bank of red clay (SE19/SE20) was created beside the west ditch. Composed mainly of clay this bank prevented the looser slate and clay fill layer (SE18) heaped to its east, from spilling down into the ditch. This fill layer was in turn topped with a smaller red clay bank (SE17). This was, like SE19/SE20, a steep sided bank with looser yellow clay and slate deposits (SE16) heaped on its east side. This construction sequence helped create a substantial west bank. Traces of loose slate bank material have previously been seen in Trench N (N20, N22), Trench NS (NS8), and Trench SU (SU23, SU27), which have all formed the east side of the west bank. The presence of a sturdy red clay bank to their west, which has not previously been observed, would explain why the slate deposits did not simply collapse into the west ditch. The top of the clay bank SE19/20 was cleaned and investigated, looking for traces of stake holes or a palisade slot; none were found. Consequently it can be concluded that this is not an earlier defensive bank, only a phase in the construction of the giant west bank. The presence of slates with holes in, suggests reused roofing material was present in layers SE16 and SE18. Reusing debris of previous roofed structures would suggest a late rather than early 12th century construction date. This corresponds with the evidence of earlier occupation, probably early 12th century, recovered from beneath the bank in Trench SU in 2017. However, we will only be certain when the bank is fully sectioned in the summer of 2018. No pottery or other dating material was recovered from the bank construction material.

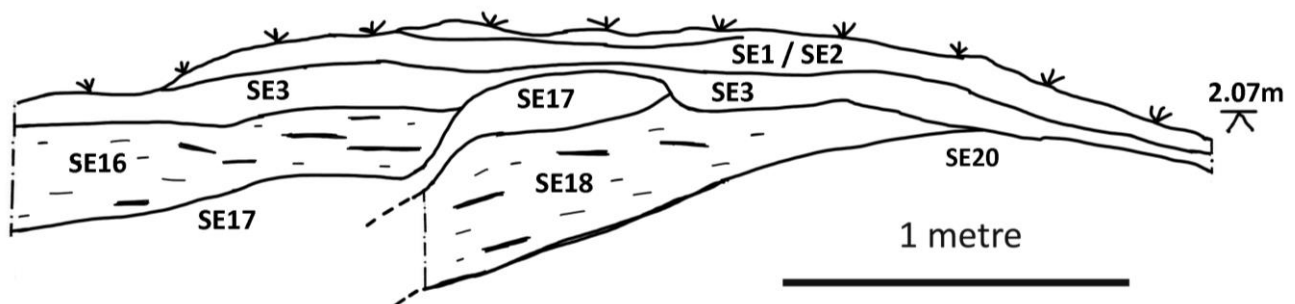


Figure 1: Trench SE – North Facing Section

Trench SE

Due to the surprisingly good weather, we were additionally able to clean a section of the north face of the 'Pembrokeshire' bank due to be excavated in the summer. Removing the vegetation and topsoil (SN1), which produced the broken base of a 19th century beer bottle, revealed a brown soil bank with a loose collection of stone, some of which is horizontally bedded (SN2). Clearly this was not a well made vertical slate constructed Pembrokeshire bank, but a loose bank of earth and stone, similar to that seen in trench BN2 in 2013. When this evidence is combined with that seen in Trench B (2008) and Trench BN (2012), it appears that loose earth and stone bank (BN2, BN5) was formed during the post medieval agricultural use of the site, later the eastern end was given a vertical slate outer face (B3, BN4) forming a Pembrokeshire bank, but only at this end.

Conclusion

This single week's work has allowed us to understand the nature of the construction of the giant west bank of the castle; a substantial construction formed from at least two smaller banks in red clay with dumps of looser slate and clay to their east. What we had previously believed to be a later Pembrokeshire bank cutting off the south west corner of the site is an ephemeral bank of loose soil and stone, created in the post medieval agricultural phase. In both cases knowledge of their construction methods informs our subsequent excavation plans and allows us to make informed decisions about their conservation.

Dr Chris Caple – April 2018

A Partnership of –



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