Nevern Castle Excavations

Interim Report 2018
Summer Excavations

Introduction

This was the thirteenth and final season of work at Nevern Castle; a four week excavation (June 17th – July 13th) directed by Dr Chris Caple (Durham University) with deputy director Chris Chinnock, site supervisor Feenagh Johnson, finds supervisor Sara Gibson and the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority community archaeologist Delun Gibby, 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. We had a range of objectives for this season's excavation: to uncover the north wall of the Great Hall (Trench SN); to investigate the construction sequence of the west bank of the castle (Trench SE); to reveal traces of buildings behind the west bank and connect them to the building sequence seen in earlier trenches along the south side of the castle (Trench SX); and to resolve the conundrum of a wall face found poking out of an animal burrow halfway down the west bank of the castle (Trench LN), see Figure 1.

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 .

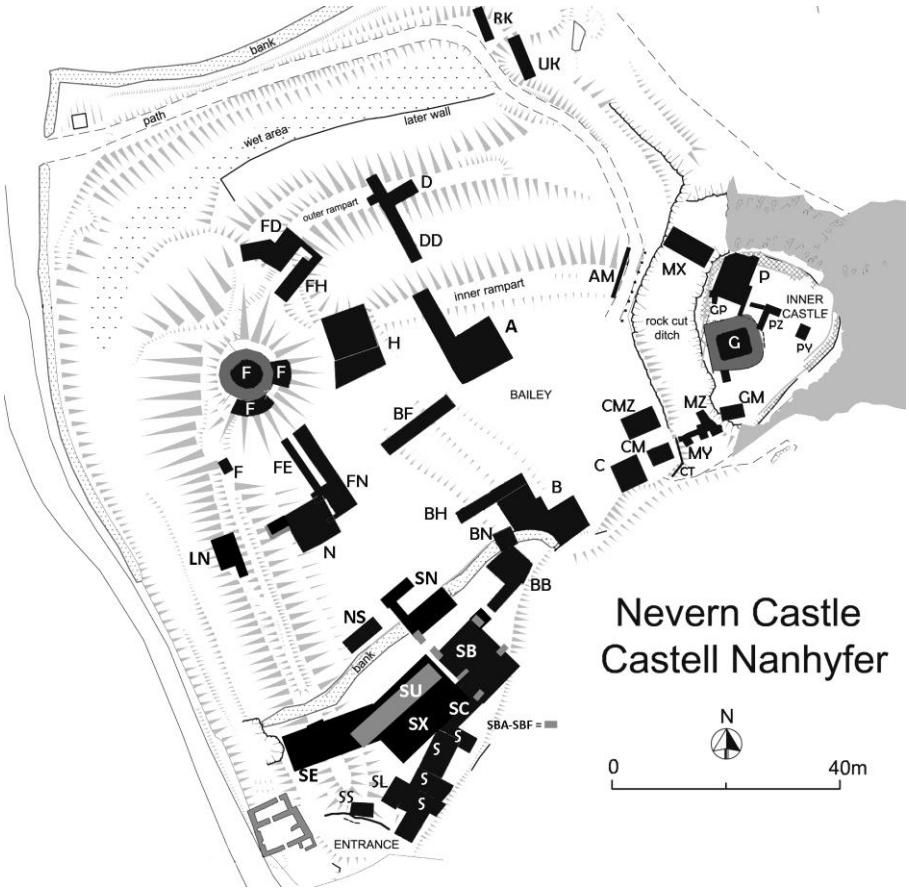

Figure 1: Location of all the trenches excavated between 2008 and 2018.

Trench SE

Excavation earlier in the year, *Nevern Castle Interim Report Easter 2018*, on the top of the west bank showed that it was badly eroded and no trace of a curtain wall or postholes / palisade slot, from wooden defences, survived. Consequently this summer's excavation was able to start with a machine excavating a deep trench through the west bank, creating stepped sections 3.4m high and 15m wide (Figure 2). Excavation of the original ground surface (SE53) showed no signs of any pre-castle agriculture or other activity. The earliest feature was a low turf bank (SE58) on which were pieces of stone (bluestone - not slate) seemingly marking a line. This is similar to the structure seen beneath the north bank (*Nevern Castle Interim Report 2010: Trench D*), but there is no evidence of an associated ditch, palisade or other defensive features and no evidence of occupation inside the bank. Consequently this appears to simply be a turf mound with marker stones on it indicating where the more substantial bank which immediately overlies it should go. This more substantial early bank (SE49, SE48, SE48, SE47, SE46 and SE45) was formed by dumping clay material at the west (front) end, next to the ditch to facilitate a steep sided bank defence, with looser material containing appreciable amounts of slate rubble piled behind to broaden the bank. No evidence of a wooden palisade was recovered, though such features are normally placed at the front (western) edge of the bank and are often lost though subsequent erosion and demolition. This bank is currently only around 1m high (though it may have been compressed due to the weight of later added material), so not the most substantial defensive structure and it may well equate with the colonisation castle bank mentioned in previous Interim Reports. Subsequently the west bank was heightened and broadened with the addition of much more clay and slate rubble, layers (SE34-44). This created a far more substantial bank over 3m high. This bank appears to have been in use during the early and middle phases of the castle's life. There was evidence that occupation activity took place behind this bank seen in the form of a slate filled pit and trench SE55/60 and SE54/64. Evidence that burning and occupation activity also occurring behind this bank was recovered in 2017 (*Nevern Castle Interim Report 2017: Trench SU*). Subsequent to this road surfaces were laid down (SE31, SX8) burying this activity. The bank was also widened and heightened with the addition of a considerable deposit of loose slate rubble (SE32). This also buried earlier evidence of occupation and a small revetting wall (SE33, SU24) of slate was created to prevent this loose slate from the bank spilling out over the road.

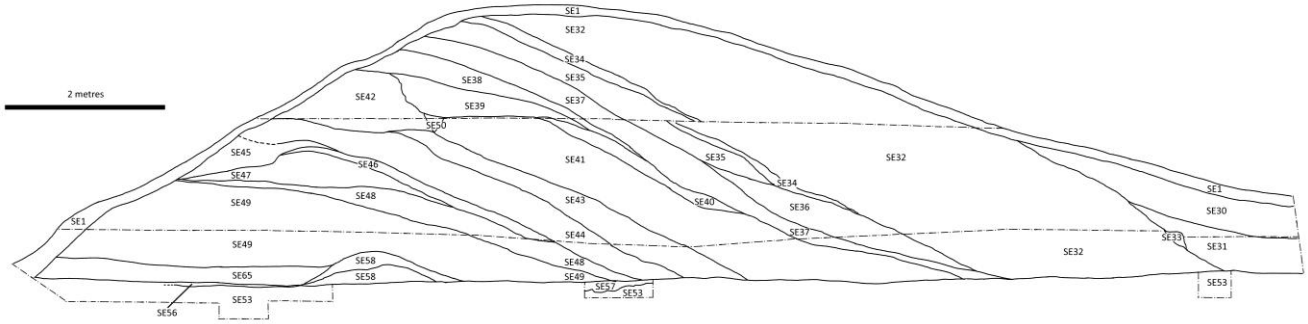

Figure 2: Trench SE, south facing section

Trench SN

A trench 9 x 4m was initially opened up over the area of the 'Pembrokeshire' Bank, which it was believed, from the construction sequence seen in Trench BN (2012), was seated on the north wall of the Great Hall. As suggested in the *Nevern Castle Interim Report - Easter 2018*, upon cleaning down the bank, it was clear that it was not a Pembrokeshire bank, with characteristic vertical slate facing, but a simple boundary bank of collected stones and earth formed into a rough mound. Consequently most of the wall was quickly removed. However, two stubs of wall were retained as this provided evidence of a more substantial core wall deliberately made of glacial boulders (SN5, SN28). The associated pottery suggested that this core came from the wall of an

18th or 19th century structure, possible a farm building or cottage. After demolition this wall core formed the basis for this bank. Beneath this wall core a layer of agricultural soil (SN10) showed that this area had been subject to ploughing and horticulture before the structure was erected. Beneath the plough-soil there was the evidence for the destruction of the Great Hall; layers of collapsed and burnt slate (SN11, SN12). The badly damaged east and west walls of the Great Hall (SN16, SN13) were subsequently found beneath this material. The presence of part of a clay pipe suggested that these walls had drainage channels (SN25, SN22) cut through them whilst the 18th / 19th century structure was in use. As excavation continued it became apparent that the north wall of the Great Hall was not present beneath the bank. Consequently the trench was expanded, initially opening up a 3m x 1.5m, then a further 2 x1.5m extension running north above the Great Hall west wall (SN13). This uncovered a path made of close packed, edge set slate (SN27). This technique was used widely in the post medieval period to make hard wearing paths and floors in slate rich areas, an example can be seen in the original paths at Aberglasney Gardens in the Tywi valley. This surface was almost certainly a floor, farmyard or path associated with the 18th / 19th century cottage or farm building. Beneath this path the west wall of the Great Hall (SN13) was recovered running north. A possible corner was noted at the end of the extended trench, so a further area 4m x 2m was opened up running east from the northern end of the previous trench. Beneath the topsoil (SN1) and agricultural soil (SN4) the north wall of the Great Hall (SN31) was finally uncovered. The discovery of the north wall means that the size of the Great Hall was finally known (Figure 3), and with internal dimensions of 22.2m x 6.2m it is larger than many of the halls of major castles in England and Wales. It appears to be the largest masonry structure, apart from St David's Cathedral, in West Wales in the late 12th century.

At the eastern end of the north wall there was evidence that a pit (SN45) had been cut down into the wall, during the post-medieval period, to rob out large, high quality slate from the wall. There was no convincing evidence for the presence of a substantial doorway into the Great Hall in this gable end wall, thus it is likely that the Great Hall was entered in the centre of the west wall, an area uncovered in 2016 and found to have been extensively damaged by a large stone robbing pit (SB36/SB33) probably seeking the gritstone blocks which formed the doorways of these buildings on the south side of the castle. During the excavation of the original SN Trench area, two pieces of carved stone had been recovered (Figures 4 & 5). Both were made of gritstone, characteristic of the work done late on in the castle's history, with a border of a chip carved saltire pattern cut into the stone. This pattern is characteristic of the Romanesque decorative style used by the Normans. Examples can be seen throughout Britain and Europe, in Wales they include St David's Cathedral (north nave clerestory), Llancarfan church (Glamorgan), Llanfilo and Llanddew churches (Breconshire) and the circular chapel in Ludlow castle (M. Thurlby 2006 *Romanesque Architecture and Sculpture in Wales*). It was the principal decorative motif around the east doorway of the Great Tower of Chepstow castle, where Rick Turner considered its use in major buildings in Britain to run from 1070 to the mid 12th century (R. Turner & A. Johnson 2006 *Chepstow Castle, its History and Buildings*, 37-8). Its use may well have carried on into the late 12th century in more distant rural locations such as Nevern. The presence of this stonework; small pieces missed by the subsequent looters of the site, suggests that the interior of the Great Hall was once highly decorated, displaying the wealth and sophistication of the owner. Given the cultural association of this pattern it is almost certainly work commissioned by the Anglo-Norman Lord William FitzMartin. The presence of these fragments at the north end of the hall suggests that this was the more decorated and thus prestigious end, where the lord would sit with his family and honoured guests, possibly on a raised dais.

Unusually, the top of the demolished stonework of the northern end of the west wall (SN13) was reddened by fire and the slate had been shattered by heat. This indicated that this wall had been demolished to its present low level before being engulfed by fire. This speaks to the deliberate demolition of part of the Great Hall before setting the castle alight as part of the 1195 slighting. Below the destruction levels the floor of the Great Hall (SN18) was uncovered.

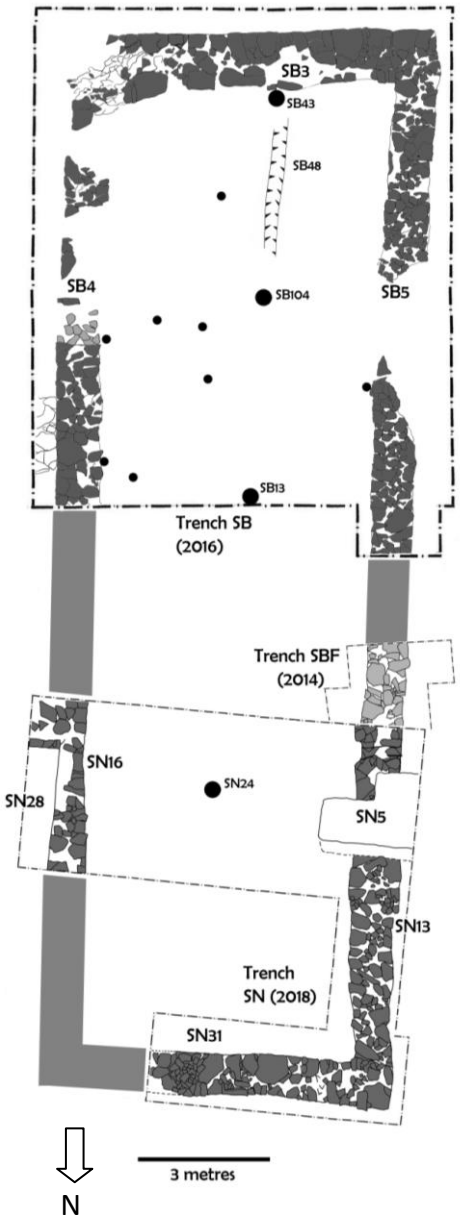

Figure 3: Plan of the Great Hall, late 12th century (Phase IIb).

Figures 4 & 5: Photographs of the chip carved saltire pattern Romanesque stone decoration recovered from Trench SN (images by Jeff Veitch).

In 2016 & 2017 Interim Reports, a sequence for the development for the Great Hall had been established:

- Phase I – a small clay mortared slate hall, which overlay the filled in defensive ditch of the early 12th century, was constructed and used
- Phase IIa – the hall was increased to the present size, an adjoining building constructed to the east; the main hall had a large central hearth
- Phase IIb – a new floor and roof supported with central posts
- Phase IIc – a new floor with many small internal (wattle & daub) walls

Evidence in 2018 suggests that in the final Phase (IIc), there was evidence of patching to maintain a good floor surface filling in depressions in the floor (SN37), but there were very few stake or

postholes. Thus, the internal walls were only present in the southern half of the hall; the northern half was still an open space. In the preceding Phase (IIb) a post hole (SN24/SN47) was uncovered which shows that the line of central posts continued the length of the building. Beneath this, at the southern edge of Trench SN, traces of a large pit (SN20/SN50) were partially uncovered, almost certainly the northern end of the early 12th century ditch which runs beneath the hall. On the east side of Trench SN a post hole (SN43/SN51) and beam slot (SN34/SN35) were uncovered which ran beneath the east wall of the Great Hall. These indicate the presence of an early 12th century wooden structure in this area, though insufficient remains were recovered to indicate the form or nature of such a building.

Trench LN

An area 4 x 2m was initially opened up on the western side of the western bank of the castle, around 3m down slope from the apex of the bank. The excavators were protected from falling to the bottom of the bank through the installation of catch fencing. The excavation started to uncover a wall face previously noted in the side of a long abandoned badger sett. Initially considered as likely to be the wall for an interval tower, the excavation, which eventually expanded to an area circa 9 x 4m, revealed that this wall ran both down the slope for at least 2.5 metres and into the bank (detectable down the burrow with an outstretched arm, light and ranging pole) for over 2m. It was the southern wall (LN4) of an entrance passage through the west bank, part of a previously unknown entrance into the castle. The wall itself was formed of clay mortared slate, 0.8 to 0.9m thick, and it sloped backwards into the bank at approx 6° from vertical, perfectly designed to hold back the weight of the clay bank. The wall on the north side (LN14) was absent (taken down in the 12th century); only rubble (LN25) and the compressed earth where it had once stood (LN24) remained. Together these walls created an entrance passage 2.6-2.8m wide through the west bank. Excavation revealed that the south entrance wall (LN4) still stands 2.8m high above the roadway into the castle, which was formed at roughly the level of the natural subsoil and had a surface of crushed slate fragments (LN10). To see if the east end of the southern entrance wall (LN4) could be found on the other side of the west bank, part of a previous excavation; Trench N, was reopened with a machine and extended approximately 1m to the south and 1m to the west. The continuation of the entrance wall was not found, however, this excavation revealed that the slate rubble (N20) which formed the back (east) side of the bank had covered up this entrance, whilst the clay bank (N21) which lay beneath the slate rubble (the middle phase of the west bank seen in Trench SE), turned in and sloped down, clearly indicating the presence of an entrance at this point. This western entrance would presumably have originally had gates to protect entry into the castle, between the walls of the entrance passage, in the centre of the bank. A portcullis at this date in this location seems unlikely. It is also probable that a protected wooden walkway ran over the entrance to provide a platform from which to hurl down projectiles on anyone attempting to gain unapproved entry through the gateway. This entrance would have been accessed via a wooden bridge over the ditch immediately to the west. This simple entrance is located under the shadow of the Round Tower atop its motte. Entrances beside Round Towers are a characteristic feature observed on a number of 13th century Welsh castles with examples at Dryslwyn, Dinefwr and Castell-y-Bere. The location of this entrance through the middle phase of the west bank would suggest a mid 12th century date, which was covered up in the late 12th century. This evidence suggests that this entrance can be attributed to the period of Welsh control and occupation of the castle i.e. The Lord Rhys. If this is correct it would appear to be the earliest entrance constructed in a Welsh stone castle. It's similarities to the revetted walled entrances of a number of Iron Age hillforts, such as Tre'r Ceir or Carn Goch, can clearly be noted. Though the technology of manufacture, clay mortared slate and the design have prehistoric antecedents and may be considered a Welsh native tradition, here at Nevern this has been merged with the Anglo-Norman castle building tradition, to provide an early step in a native Welsh stone castle building tradition.

This entranceway also preserves the evidence of a series of dramatic events. After construction and use, a number of shallow postholes were dug into the floor of the entrance passageway

(LN22/LN23, LN26/LN27, LN28/LN29) indicating that the entranceway was deliberately blocked up with a wooden palisade, presumably to make the castle safe after the gateway had been damaged or burnt. Subsequently a blocking wall (LN13) was built across the passageway closing the entrance (Figure 6). This was constructed of clay mortared slate (which may for speed have been taken from the backs of the adjacent north and south entrance walls) and butted up against the front half of the north and south entrance walls, effectively sealing the entrance passage. However, this blocking wall was subsequently badly damaged and the northern entrance wall completely demolished. The only reason for such damage would appear to be to gain access into the castle. If besiegers are protected with sturdy mobile roof structures, known as mantlets (also known as cats, Welsh cats or sows) (J. Bradbury 1992 *The Medieval Siege*, 271-2), it is relatively easy to disassemble a clay mortared slate wall with a crowbar. The evidence would suggest that this entrance suffered one or two sieges; an initial damage of burning of the wooden gate which was subsequently protected with a wooden palisade and a later blocking wall which was then damaged and partially mined away. Eventually this entrance was buried under a large deposit of clay so reforming the line of the original bank. The weight of this large volume of earth moved the remnants of the hastily built blocking wall, pushing and tipping it forward and partially skewing it round, so it no longer sits in its original position. The western edge of the south entrance wall (LN4) was then deliberately slighted so it matched the contours of the bank and was not visible. Presumably the wooden bridge was also removed, so all evidence of this entrance had been obliterated. The weakness of such entrances is why complex highly defensible gateways and eventually gatehouses evolved in the 13th century.

Figure 6: Photographs of the blocking wall (LN13) (supported by a block of earth since the wall is slightly tipped forward) and the south side wall (LN4) of the west entrance to the castle. The ranging rod marks the position of the dismantled northern side wall (LN14). Old burrowing activity by badgers is evident.

Trench SX

An area 15 x 11m was opened up; from the back of the west bank on the west side to the Great Hall on the east and from the previous trenches S (2014) and SC (2015) on the south side to close to the Pembrokeshire bank on the north. This included the whole of the area of Trench SU

excavated in 2017. The topsoil was removed by machine, since we had seen in Trench SU, that it contained no useful archaeological information. It was hoped that opening up a larger area would better enable us to identify and interpret the ephemeral pits, stakeholes and gulleys which criss-crossed the area (Figure 7).

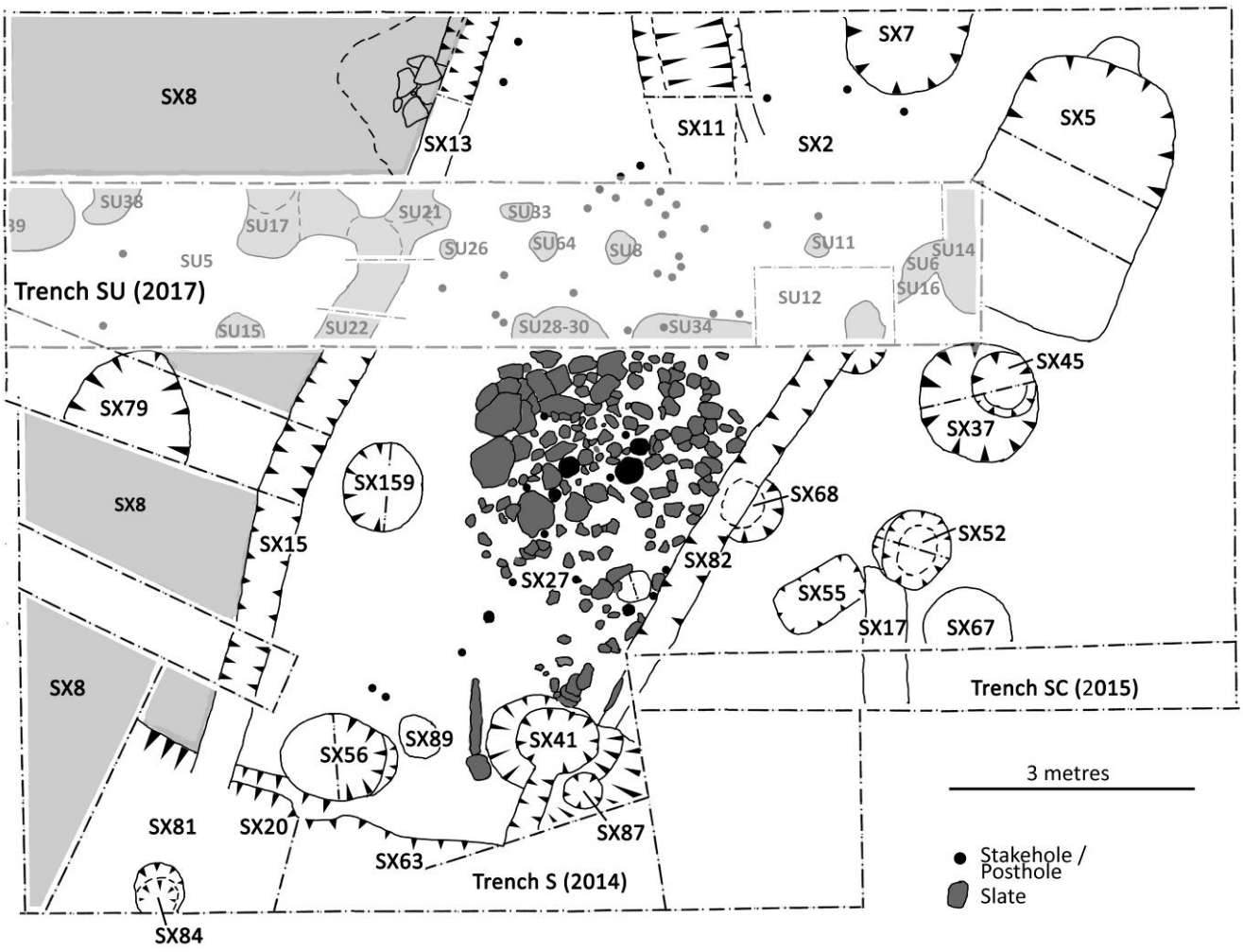

Figure 7: Plan of Trench SX.

Because the site sloped to the south and was extensively damaged by ploughing we ended up excavating features of all periods of the castle's history throughout the four week excavation. They can be grouped into a number of related activities:

- After the castle's destruction and looting in 1195 the whole site had been ploughed damaging and reducing all features. This had removed almost all evidence of the castle's burning and demolition from this area. Later, in this post-medieval agricultural period, the ploughing switched to consistently ploughing north to south. This led to soil build up on the south slope with nearly 0.4-0.5m of plough-soil protecting the damaged archaeology beneath. At the top of the slope on the north side of the trench, ploughing continued to wear away the archaeology leaving just the bottom of pits, stakeholes and gulleys (SX11).
- A series of large pits (SX5, SX37, SX52, SX41, SX56) cut down into the natural clay subsoil (SX2) and continuous pit/quarry (SX81, SX20, SX63) cut into the original steep southern slope of the site. These pits were dug to extract clay for use as clay mortar to construct the clay and slate buildings which lay immediately to the east (Great Hall) and south (curtain wall, Trapezoidal Tower and gateway). The clay was extracted and puddled by pouring water into the bottom of a shallow depression and then stamping it down to form mud in the base of the pit. After scooping out the mud for use as mortar the process could be

endlessly repeated. This created a series of unusual narrow straight sided pits – which was what we found. Not surprisingly all these pits stopped being created when they reached the bottom of the clay deposit coming down onto the crushed slate bedrock layer (SX51) beneath. These pits, which ranged from 0.8 to 2.0m in diameter and 0.6 to 1.2m deep, were then filled in, usually initially with clay and slate debris from the building work and then later with domestic debris. One pit (SX41) had domestic debris throughout its fill. These pits were created throughout the slate and clay construction of the mid and late 12th century. During the later occupation the contents of the earlier pits compressed and the contents sank (deflated) leaving dished tops into which further occupation debris was swept, creating a layered stratigraphy in the upper pit fill. This was particularly visible in the layered section through the largest pit (SX5).

- On the west side of the trench, there was a roadway (SX8). It changed character, from a substantial compact stone roadway 0.4m thick seen in Trench NS in 2017 to a thin surface layer of stone (<0.1m thick) seen in the south west corner of Trench SX. This thin surface was seen to overly the fill (SX80) of pit (SX81) which contained substantial pieces of gritstone (two door jambs). Since the gritstone appears only to have been used in the castle circa AD1171-1191, (SX8) must be a late 12th century roadway surface. Elsewhere, there is a much thicker roadway surface which almost certainly built up through the history of the castle. The deep flat bottomed gulley (SX13, SX15) had been created to take all the water from the west side of the bank and roadway out of the castle to prevent it spilling into the buildings in the bailey, which is why it was so substantial. It appears likely that the roadway and upper part of the gulley were dug away in the south west corner of Trench SX during the mid 12th century when the entrance switched to the west side. This may have been an opportunity to get at the clay beneath the roadway (pit SX79). The road surface was later re-instated when the entrance switched back to the south circa 1171-1191. The fact that the deep gulley (SX13, SX15) was 47cms deep in the northern half of the trench, where there had been extensive ploughing, and only 26cms deep in the middle of the SX Trench area, is explained by such a sequence of events, as is the fact that the gulley (SX13, SX15) was also cut by the later 12th century pit (SX81).
- A second gulley (SX82) also ran through Trench SX, probably draining water from the Great Hall (Phase I). Later this gulley was cut through by the pits (SX5) and SX41) in their quest for clay. This gulley cut through earlier dump deposits of slate and clay (SX27, SX25) which formed the base for an earlier building.
- Despite its damage by the plough, there were still traces of an early building in the centre of Trench SX; it had a substantial worn slate floor (SX27) and a reddened hearth in its south east corner which was surrounded with a number of postholes and stakeholes. This was probably a wooden building with wattle and daub walls, since when it burnt down an extensive layer of burnt clay (SX25) was deposited over the area. There was evidence of a surface (SX169) running from the early roadway towards this structure. This was overlain by a later spread of stone (SX16) which may be suggested as a later pathway from the late road surface running towards the Great Hall. The base of numerous stake and postholes to the north of this area suggests that there were other wooden buildings east of the roadway running north, but the plough damage has removed so much evidence it is not possible to reconstruct meaningful structures with any confidence.
- Dumps of clay and slate (SX18, SX131) and brown soil and slate (SX46, SX129, SX28, SX58) were deposited on this southern slope, presumably to level up the ground prior to the construction of buildings.

Conclusion

This final season has greatly improved our understanding of the castle's development. Work on the west bank showed three phases of construction. An early phase with low bank and evidence of occupation inside the bank, possibly equating with the colonisation castle, a middle phase with a far more substantial 3m high bank and a final phase when the bank was made higher and

much wider with the addition of large quantities of slate rubble. The middle phase bank was probably that created when Robert FitzMartin increased the defensive capacity of the castle circa 1114-6 and stayed in use for much of the mid 12th century. A clay mortared slate passage entrance was subsequently driven through this bank near the Round Tower. This arrangement appears to be part of a Welsh stone castle building tradition which was well developed by the mid 13th century. However, the work at Nevern appears to be of mid 12th century date and associated with the construction of the Round Tower and the first phase of the Great Hall; probably the first stone castle erected by a Welsh lord; the Lord Rhys. There is evidence that this entrance was subsequently damaged during a siege, which is not historically recorded. Later this entrance was buried under slate rubble recovered when the exterior ditch was deepened. This was part of an extensive remodelling of the castle; the Great Hall extended and a service block and separate Great Chamber or Chapel added together with a new remodelled southern entrance. This work is currently associated with William FitzMartin in the period 1171-1191. Our work this year showed the full extent of his Great Hall, a significant building projecting into the centre of the bailey and dominating the castle. The recovered stonework showed that this building was decorated with gritstone blocks, some with a border of chip carved saltire pattern. This demonstrates that Nevern castle was part of the Anglo-Norman world, plugged into a European cultural tradition; the Romanesque, which stretched throughout the Norman world from Sicily to the Orkney Islands. However, the presence of pits used to dig out and puddle clay required for constructing the clay and slate buildings which filled the southern side of this castle remind us that for much of the 12th century Nevern castle looked like a building site.

The 11 years (13 seasons) of work on this site have given us a much clearer picture of this complex castle with its mixture of Anglo-Norman and Welsh building traditions. We now understand how this castle developed through its history and transformed from an earth and timber castle into one of the earliest stone castles constructed in West Wales. We have been able to leave two towers conserved and permanently displayed whilst much more evidence remains safely preserved beneath the ground; the ditches with their valuable waterlogged evidence of 12th century life, the pits rich in pottery and the walls of numerous 12th century buildings. Only now do we understand what a valuable cargo of evidence about the 12th century in Wales is present on this site. The information recovered from these excavations should help Nevern Community Council and Cadw make the arguments necessary to protect this site for the foreseeable future. I would like to thank all the local volunteers, student volunteers, colleagues from Pembrokeshire Coast National Park, Durham University and Cadw who have worked so hard to help us achieve this.

Dr Chris Caple – August 2018

A Partnership of –

Nevern Community Council

Pembrokeshire Coast National Park

Durham University Dept of Archaeology