



Nevern Castle Excavations

Interim Report 2017

Summer Excavations

Introduction

This was the eleventh season of work at Nevern Castle; a three week excavation (June 26th – July 15th) directed by Dr Chris Caple (Durham University) with supervisors Chris Chinnock, Feenagh Johnson, finds supervisor Bethan Bryan and site assistants Adam Mead and Clare Stevens 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 complete the excavation of the Great Hall (Trench SB), to investigate the area of the road into the castle and any associated structures (Trench SU and NS), to resolve the construction sequence of the northern bank and motte (Trench FD) and to examine the northern banks and ditches (Trenches RK and UK), see Figure 1.

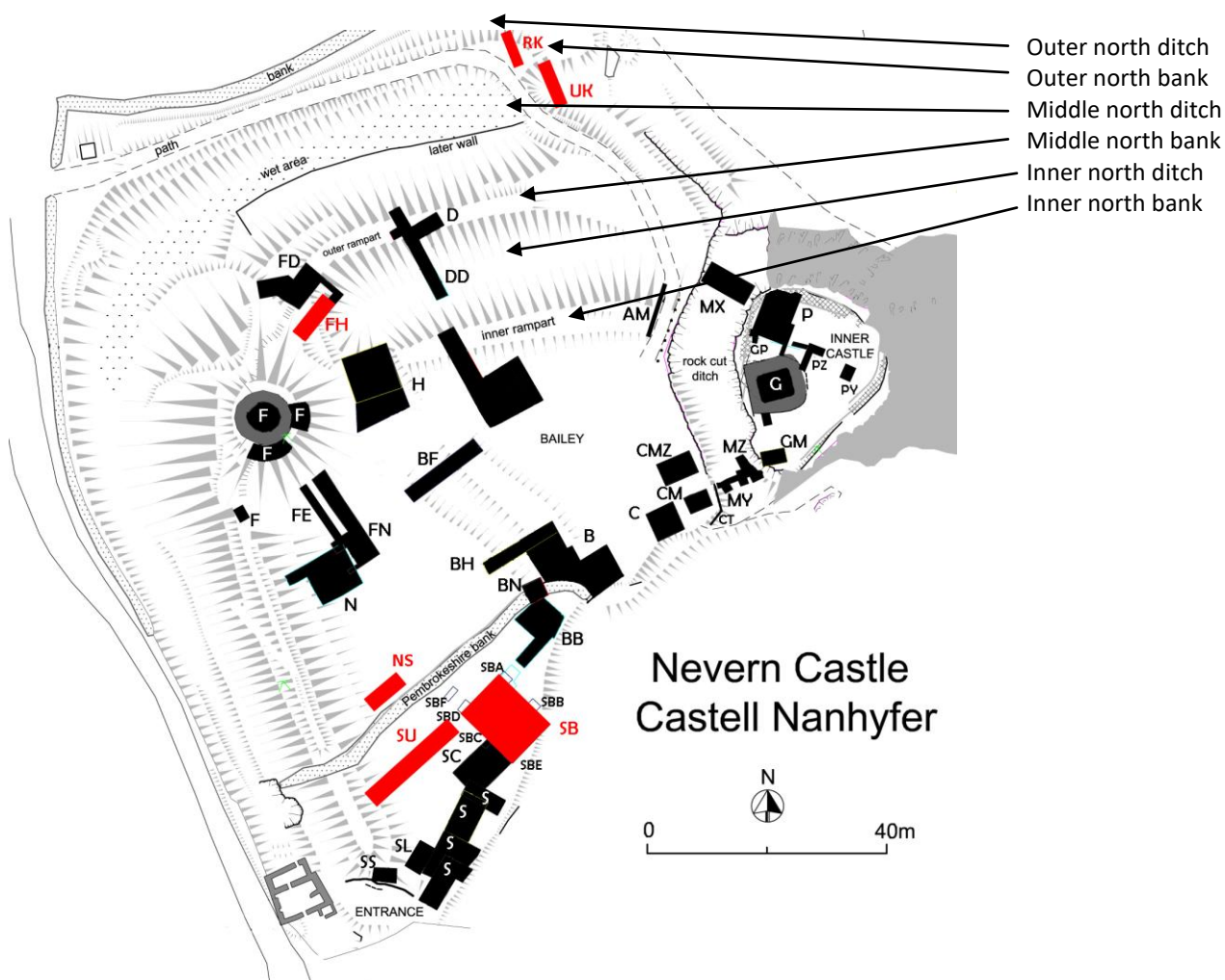


Figure 1: Location of the Excavated Trenches 2008-2017

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 Llandovery, 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 12th 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 12th century (Phase 6 and 7). 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 17th to the 20th 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 12th century Wales and the site shows that rare transition stage of the late 12th century when castles throughout the principality were being redeveloped from earth and timber into stone.

Excavations 2017

The northern side of Nevern castle appears to have been protected by a series of 3 banks and ditches, a modern hedgerow beyond may even be based on a fourth outer counterscarp bank. In 2010 the middle northern bank was section (Trench D) as was the inner north ditch (Trench DD). In 2015, 2016 and again this summer 2017, we have investigated the junction between the motte and the middle north bank (Trenches FD and FH – see below). This summer we also

investigated the outer north bank (Trench RK) and the north face of the middle north bank and the middle north ditch.

Trench FH

An area 8.5 x 3m was excavated on the southern slope of the junction between the north bank and the motte. This was undertaken to clarify the construction sequence suggested by the trench section recorded in 2016. The earliest evidence of human activity in the area is the occupation (FH19) associated with the initial conquest castle. Subsequently the motte was built and a deep steep sided ditch constructed around its base (FH48 / FH30). This ditch was found in previous trenches H, FE and FN between the motte and the castle bailey. This summer we found its north east terminal in trench FH, which ran right up to the edge of a clay bank (FH44 / FH46) which buried the earlier occupation material (FH19) and presumably the earlier colonisation castle bank. This formed the original middle north bank projecting beyond the castle to protect the town. Subsequently a small defensive ditch (FH47 / FH29) was cut north-south across this bank to provide greater protection to the motte. This middle north bank was then buried under the much larger clay bank (FH7 / FH12), which is the one we see today. It was into this bank that the large wooden palisade discussed in the 2015 and 2016 Interim Reports was cut. A new north-south ditch FH15 was again cut across the bank to protect the motte. Since the material which weathered into both the earlier N-S ditch FH47 and this later N-S ditch FH15 was the clay of the bank, the fill of the ditches was exactly the same as the banks into which it was cut. Consequently it was not possible to accurately discern the edges of these ditches and it is possible that the later ditch cut through both the later bank FH7/FH12 and the earlier bank FH44/FH46 and may have been a single deep ditch with slot (ankle breaker) cut into its base. Subsequently the later ditch filled with a series of deposits (FH23, FH20, FH28, FH14, FH13, FH24) and occupation material spilled down the motte which had the round tower on its top (FH34/FH11, FH32, FH31, FH39/FH9, FH36, FH35, FH33/FH8, FH41, FH42). Both these deposits were capped with the destruction debris FH6, from the slighting of the castle which was in turn overlain by layers of gradual soil formation (FH3, FH2, FH1). Right back at the start of the sequence, the jaw bone of a horse (lower right mandible) was discovered beneath the bank FH44/FH46. Though there were a few scraps of other bone present in the occupation layer FH19, this was unusually complete and may have been a deliberate ritual deposit ahead of the bank construction.

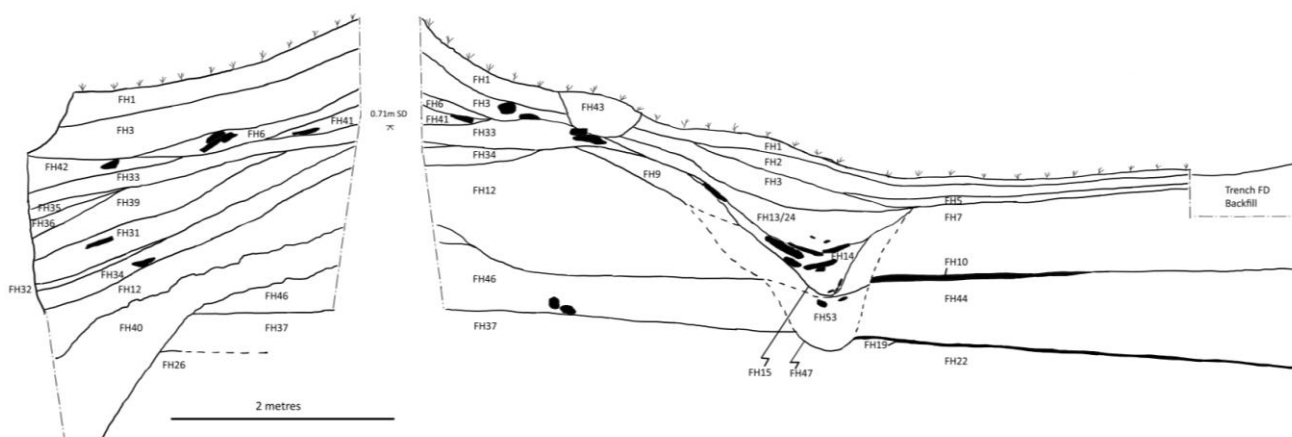


Figure 2: Trench FH – East and South facing section through the two banks and N-S ditch(s)

Trench RK

A trench 4m x 1.5m was initially excavated across the outer northern bank (Figure 1) later extended to 5.5m x 1.5m. Much of this bank was lost when the path into the castle was created in the early 1980's. The RK trench was sited across the eastern end of the bank, after the path turned across the middle ditch, in order to try and recover bank information undisturbed by modern activity. Traces of the bank material RK3 and RK4 were recovered in a shallow mound over a layer of broken slightly worn and rounded slates (RK6). These appear to have been

deliberately strewn on the original ground surface (RK7) prior to construction of the bank in order to improve footing for those involved in bank construction. This technique is still used by local farmers in muddy areas today and an identical deposit (FH10) was seen in trench FH beneath the large bank FH7/FH12 before it was constructed. No dating evidence was recovered for the bank construction in Trench RK, however the similarity with FH10 suggest this outer northern bank was constructed at the same time as the middle north bank; probably Phase 4c of the castle's construction when the defences were greatly enhanced.

Trench UK

A trench 4m x 1.5m was initially excavated across the middle north ditch and part way up the north face of the middle north bank. This trench was later extended to 5.5m and an additional 1.8 x 1.8m area excavated east of its southern end. It showed a sequence of organic rich, black soil deposits (UK2, UK3, UK4) forming in the middle north ditch, seated on top of clay and slate rubble from the castle's slighting (UK5 / UK7). The soil was soft and easily saturated, thus for safety reasons, excavation stopped at 1m depth. Only the lower half of the middle north bank was explored in this trench. Traces of a damaged post-medieval wall (not clay mortared) (UK10) were revealed part way up the bank (UK6, UK9). This may be related to a shoulder seen further east along the bank. These features may denote the presence of a small trackway protected / formed by a small revetting wall (UK10) giving access to the bottom of the ditch for grazing cattle in the post medieval period.

Trench SU

A trench 16.5m x 2.0m was initially excavated between the Great Hall and the western bank, to reveal the route of the road running up into the castle from the south gate and detect the presence of any associated buildings. The western 3m of this trench was eventually expanded to 3m wide to better reveal details of the road and bank construction. The earliest features seen in the trench were the bases of a series of post holes, stake holes and a beam slot cut into the natural clay subsoil (SU5). These represented the seating for posts and beams of 12th century wooden structures. The narrow nature of the trench meant that it was not possible to identify lines or other patterns in the post holes which could relate to specific structures. A larger area would need to be exposed before such arrangements could be identified. The 12th century ground surface had sloped down from east to west, consequently the higher centre and east end of this surface had been ploughed away by later agricultural activity. The west end was both lower and protected by a later bank, so here 12th century surfaces were preserved. Features such as a line of 3 post holes at this end of the trench SU45, SU70, SU69/44 suggest the presence of an early 12th century wooden defensive or domestic structure. This was overlain by burning deposits and a thin brown earth (SU41, SU63, SU43, SU61). This may represent destruction of the early 12th century timber castle and a period of abandonment and vegetation growth. The early 12th century bank and ditch defences lay to the west, beyond the excavated SU trench area.

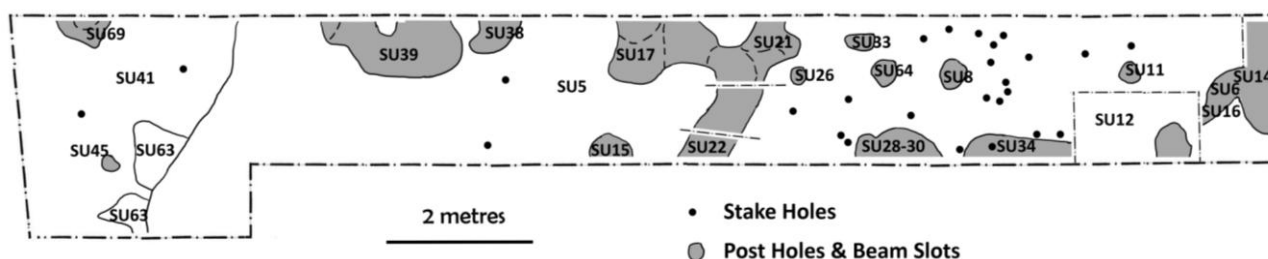


Figure 3: Trench SU – Plan of the early wooden features.

Subsequently a large bank of loose slate (SU27) was thrown up over this area and a road (SU19) was constructed immediately to the east of this bank. The bank was later raised in height with more loose slate rubble (SU23). Revetting structures; a shallow bank in grey soil (SU20) and a

small, neat curved revetting wall (SU24), were created to keep the bank material from spilling over the roadway. A new more substantial surface (SU25) was later deposited on the roadway, which included some large pieces of slate which became rounded with from the passage of feet over the stones throughout the late 12th century. We cannot be certain what lay between the road and the Great Hall in the late 12th century since, as previously mentioned, later agricultural activity had ploughed out these deposits. It seems likely that a series of wooden structures were present, their posts seated in the subsoil SU5, cut through those of the early 12th century. Complex intercutting of post holes was evident at several points in Trench SU (SU17, SU21). Subsequently the agricultural activity in this area, much of it deriving from the 19th century cottage (Pwll-y-broga) present in the western ditch, tore up most of the road surface and led to the formation of a thick 0.5 – 1.0m deep agricultural soil (SU2). This was rich in pottery which dated from the 12th to the 20th century. Subsequent tree growth and animal burrowing activity, made discerning the features cut down into the clay subsoil (SU5) difficult to accurately detect, excavate and record.

Trench NS

A trench 7m x 2m was excavated just behind (east of) the west bank, north of the Pembrokeshire bank, with the intention of confirming the presence and determining the nature of, the road into the castle, which Trench SU had suggested ran behind the west bank. The earliest features in the trench were clay layers NS26 and NS27 at the west end running downhill with the slope, probably towards the early 12th century bank and ditch defences which lie beyond the west end of the trench. Behind these was a substantial slot NS30/NS29 and a large posthole NS21/NS22 which suggest the presence of a sequence of wooden buildings or palisades. The palisade slot was quickly filled in with clay similar to that into which it had been dug. It may have been the earlier feature which was replaced by the post hole (and an associated wooden construction) which lasted longer, as the fill of the posthole was unlike the clay into which it was cut. The palisade slot is reminiscent to the palisade slots seen in Trench FD on the north bank which derive from the defences of the early 12th century castle. East of these were a charcoal rich deposit and a slate surface NS19 and NS20 probably remaining fragments of early 12th century occupation.

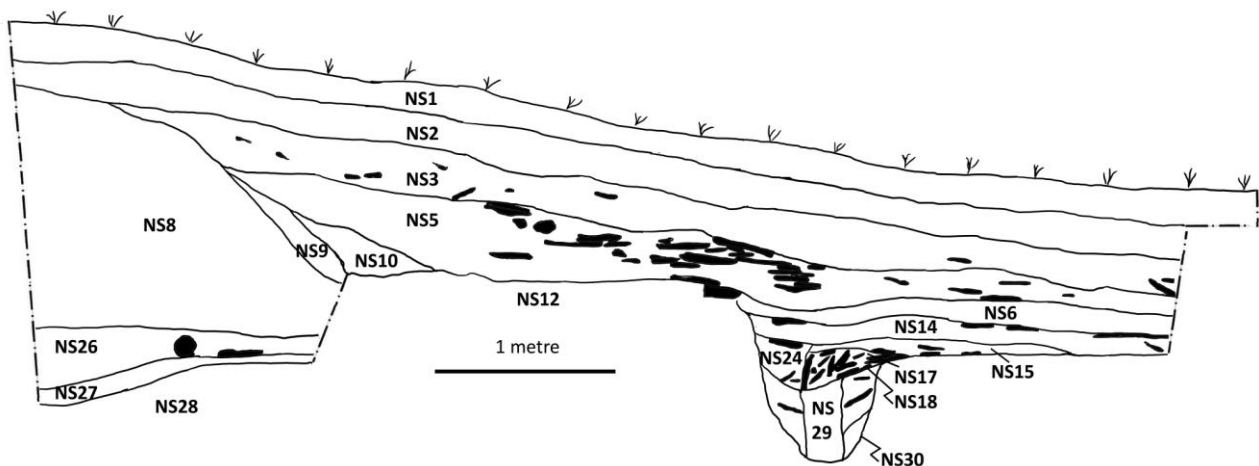


Figure 4 Trench NS – South facing section through the and palisade slot and late 12th century road and bank

Subsequently a series of road deposits NS32/NS33/NS31/NS23 were deposited west of the wooden structure. It is likely that the present west bank of loose slate rubble (NS8) was constructed at this time. The bank was capped with a layer of clay (NS9) which had additional horizontally laid revetting slate (NS25) constructed on its eastern face to try and prevent loose slate slipping down from the bank over the road surfaces, which the presence of similar features in Trench SU, would suggest this was a recurring problem. The road lay between the west bank and the wooden structure. Subsequently the wooden post was removed and a trench or beam slot (NS18) was cut along the same line. Wooden beam (NS36) which was inserted into this slot acting as a wall plate

to support a further wooden wall. A fillet of slate and clay formed between the wooden beam and the road (NS24). Subsequently the final road surface (NS12), probably constructed in the late 12th century, was deposited. This road surface was in use for a long time and had a mixture of small cobble and very smooth worn larger slate. This was almost certainly the road surface in use in the castle when Giraldus Cambrensis and Archbishop Baldwin visited Nevern to raise men for the crusade in 1188. Subsequently the wooden beam was removed (NS37) (rotted?) and the trench filled with slate debris (NS17), over which a thin cobble surface NS15, which ran east and was presumably the path to or floor / courtyard of a building, was deposited. The roadway continued in use, the rain washed fine slate powder off the bank creating grey silt deposits NS10 on the road and NS14 on the cobble. After this the castle was slighted and soil layers NS6, NS5 built up – containing large amounts of slate debris. From the amount of slate it seems likely that there were stone buildings in this area, but close to the road these were looted of good building slate after the castle was slighted and abandoned, and no remains of buildings were found in situ. By the post medieval period the area was subject to agriculture and a thick layer of agricultural soil NS3, NS2, NS1 built up. This, together with the destruction layer, protected the late 12th century road surface; one of the few places in the castle where the full depth of the road deposits have been preserved intact.

Trench SB

A 9.5 x 11.5m trench was initially opened in 2016 over the Great Hall. In 2017 this was reopened, focussing on the 9m x 6m internal area of the Great Hall itself. Combining the results from the two years we can see the sequence of events which occurred in this area:

- In the early 12th century a series of earthen defences of the castle were created. A number of shallow ditches (SB96) were cut, probably between high clay banks, part of the defences for the south side of the castle (dark grey in Figure 5).
- The ditches were filled in with domestic debris in a clearing of the castle and remodelling of the defences, presumably occurring in the mid 12th century. As part of this remodelling a hall (Great Hall - Phase I) (SB89, SB90, SB71 & SB42) of clay mortared slate was built. A pit / posthole SB88/SB700, which was excavated beneath Great Hall Phase II wall (SB4), has similar dimensions to two pits/postholes excavated into the southern clay bank / ditch fill which were unearthed in 2015. These may attest the presence of a wooden palisade or similar wooden defensive structure at this date. Any such wooden palisade structure would have been present before the Great Hall Phase II, but after the early ditches had been filled in.
- The domestic debris filling of the early 12th century ditches (sectioned in 2015 and 2013) caused subsidence and it may be imagined led to a considerable smell. Consequently when in the mid to late 12th century when there was extensive remodelling of the Hall, the original fill in the ditch was dug out and the ditch filled; in the area of the planned walls with glacial boulders (SB97) and fresh clay (SB98), inside the planned hall area with slate rubble (SB87) and capping layer of clay and slate (SB78). Outside the hall area the original ditch fill remained. Then the clay mortared slate wall of Great Hall – Phase II (SB3, SB4, SB5) (highlighted in Figure 5) were built over their new secure foundations. The new Great Hall was given a floor of pure clay SB77.
- The Great Hall - Phase II was occupied for some time; there were stakeholes in the floor, and extensive burning (charcoal deposits SB80-85) and reddening (SB58) of the clay floor (SB77). This appears to mark the presence of a central hearth, though the extent of the reddening of the clay suggests that the location of the fire moved around within the centre of the hall area. An occupation layer of brown soil SB56/SB40 was then deposited over much of the area. The extent of the burning and subsidence of the floor into the ditch indicates that this was the main floor of the hall for some considerable time.
- Subsidence of the floor in the centre of the Great Hall necessitated the deposition of a further layer of clay and cobble (SB55) and some associated stakeholes to create a further, briefly used floor. This occurred when there was a major change to the building.

Substantial pits were dug into the centre (SB67) and southern (SB65) end of the building (probably another just beyond the north baulk). These large pits up to 1.2m deep and 1.1m diameter went down to the glacial slate rubble to achieve a firm footing for their posts. They originally housed substantial timbers almost certainly a remodelling of the hall probably to support substantial upper storey or provide additional support to a damaged roof.

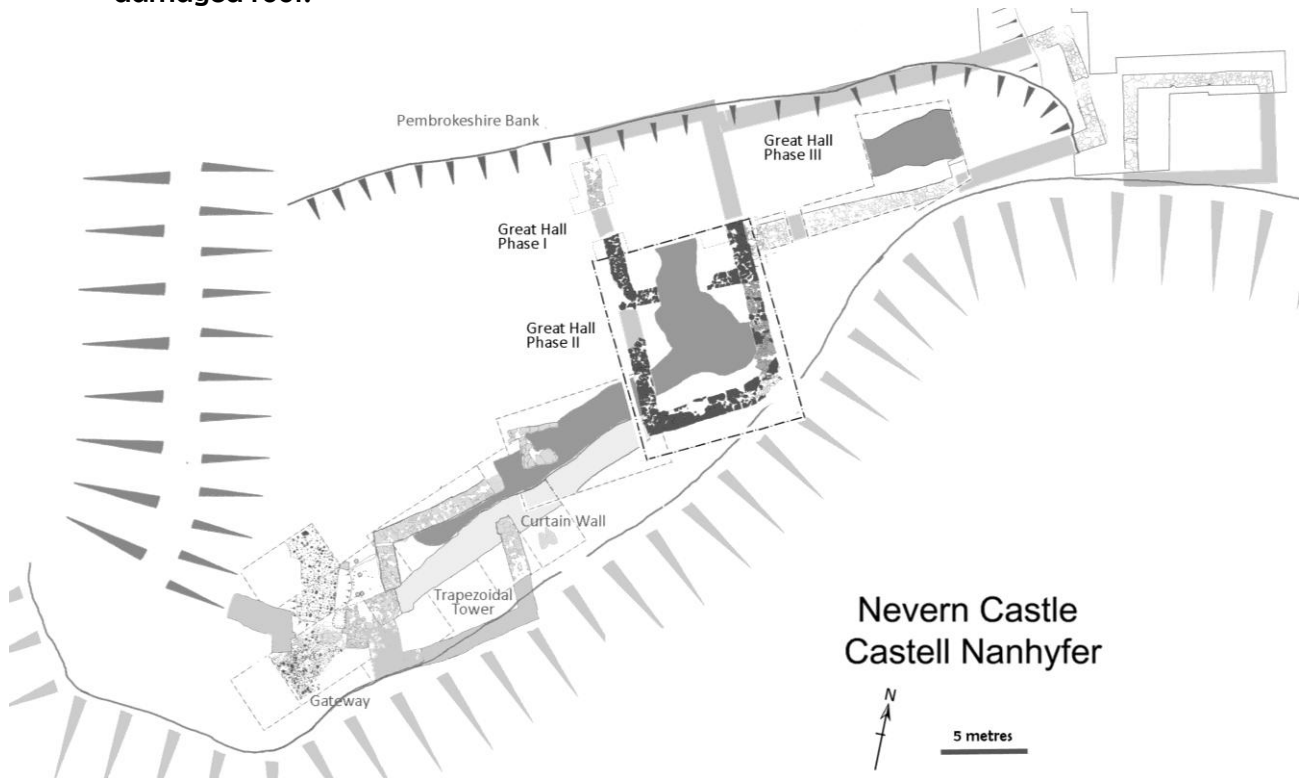


Figure 5: Plans of the Great Hall and Trench SB. The extent of the early 12th century ditches are noted in dark grey. The stonework of Phases I and II of the Great Hall is also highlighted.

- Subsequently a clay floor SB28/39 was laid, into which smaller posts were initially sunk, together with a crude beam slot suggesting partition of at least the southern half of the hall into two smaller rooms (Figure 6 (I) in 2016 Interim Report).
- Later the function of the hall changed and the presence of a large number (>100) stake holes indicates that a large number of small wattle and daub partitions were constructed in the hall floor. This divided the space up into numerous rooms where it seem likely either individual activities took place or different individuals were housed. In the final late 12th century period – this building no longer functioned as a Great Hall but as a domestic space (Figure 6 (II) in 2016 Interim Report).
- The Great Hall was burnt and the walls were collapsed (slighted). So little domestic material was recovered from Trench SB, that it suggests that the Great Hall had been stripped of furniture, tools and utensils before it was set alight. Only a couple of iron door hinges were left in the debris.

Conclusion

Despite the hot temperatures of the first week and a couple of rainy days later in the dig we uncovered, recorded and explained a significant amount of archaeology in the four weeks of this year's excavation and achieved all our stated objectives. I am grateful for the sheer amount of hard work which everyone put in. We continue to make significant advances in our understanding of the development of this castle.

The picture which emerges from this seasons work suggests that after the construction of the initial bank and ditch colonisation castle (Phase 3a), a substantial motte with associated ditch and a northern protective bank were all erected together (Phase 4a). The large bank defences we now see present on the north side (middle north bank) FH7/FH12 must now be considered a later phase of construction (Phase 4c). This was still part of this early wood and timber phase of this castle. The presence of a similar layer of rounded fragments of slate in Trenches RK and FH, suggests that the outer northern bank was added at the same time that the middle northern bank was heightened both preceded by this characteristic working floor material. The motte was always protected from capture from the middle north bank through the construction of a defensive ditch running north south across the bank in both Phase 4a (bank FH44/46) and Phase 4c (bank FH7/12).

After the early ditch defences were filled in, a small hall of clay mortared slate was constructed down in the south western corner of the site, possibly protected by a wooden palisade defence on its south side. Later there was a substantial remodelling of the site. If, as seems likely, the loose slate rubble of the bank construction SU23 is obtained in the same building construction phase as the loose slate rubble used to fill the ditches in trench SB, i.e. SB87, then the west bank of the castle was greatly heightened at the same time that the Great Hall - Phase II was constructed. The deliberate emptying of the early 12th century ditches of silts and domestic debris, filling areas under the walls with clay and glacial stone foundations whilst the rest of the ditches inside the buildings were filled with slate rubble, but those outside the hall remained un-emptied speaks of a very deliberate planned rebuilding phase. The Phase II south extension to the Hall and the Phase III easterly extension of the Hall may have been put up at the same time, deliberately creating an L shaped building. If Phase II served as a Great Hall, Phase III would traditionally be described as a Great Chamber or attached Service Block. The building to its east may have served as a Chapel.

Though visually similar the present middle north and inner west banks of the castle appear to have different construction histories and further excavation will be needed to resolve this issue.

Access into castles normally occurs through a single road into the centre of the bailey. The evidence from trenches NS and SU clearly shows that the road into Nevern castle entered through the southern corner entrance and ran north behind the west bank towards the motte and round tower. The lack of postholes and other structures in the clay subsoil beneath the roadway suggests that the later 12th century road marks the route of the early 12th century roadway, though only faint traces of the earlier surface (NS32) are still present. The presence of multiple phases of wooden constructions throughout the 12th century, some immediately beside the road, all speaks to a castle bailey crowded with wooden buildings.

Dr Chris Caple – September 2017

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