

Nevern Castle Excavations

Interim Report 2009

Introduction

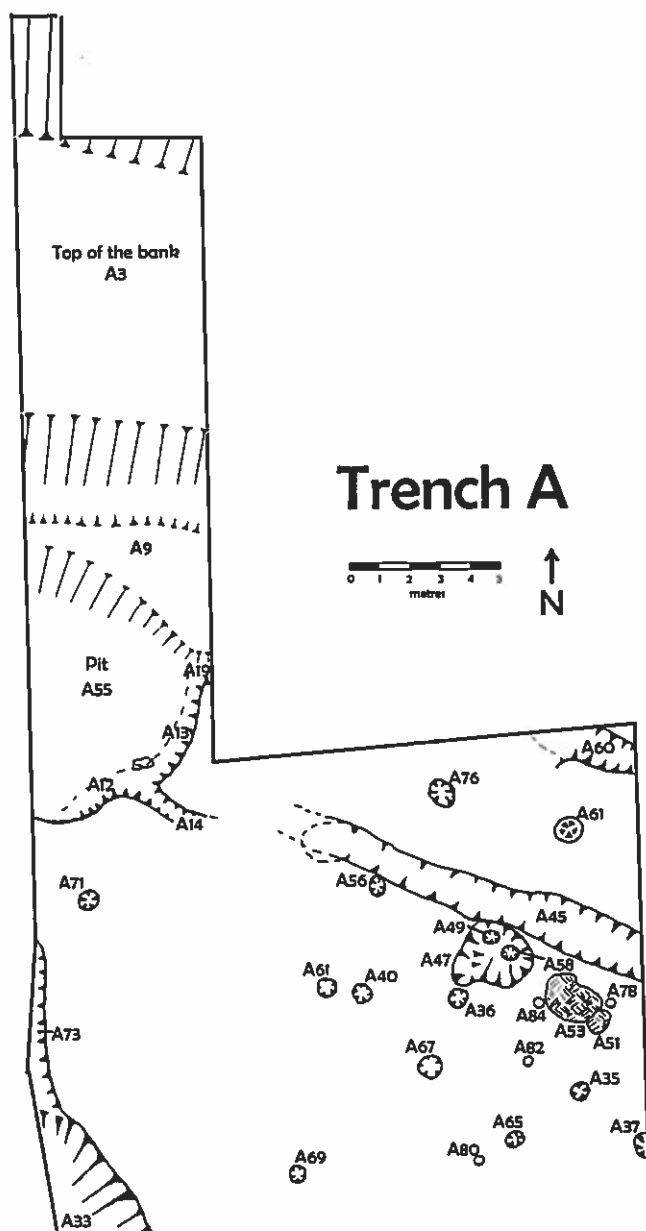
This was the second season of excavation at Nevern Castle; a four-week excavation (June 14th – July 10th) directed by Dr Chris Caple (Durham University) with supervisor Will Davies, community archaeologist Richard Jones (Dyfed Archaeological Trust), a team of students from Durham and Lampeter Universities and local volunteers. This season followed an earlier geophysical survey of the site in 2005 and two weeks excavation in 2008. The excavation was primarily funded by Cadw and The Welsh Assembly with assistance from the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority. The objectives for this season's excavation were, to complete the excavation of trenches A and B, so investigating the extent of archaeological remains in the bailey of the castle, complete excavation of the top of the motte revealing any structures present and to start excavation of the banks and ditches on the north side of the site. Richard Jones created a diary of the progress of the excavation, details can be seen at: www.cambria.org.uk/nevern/neverndiary.html

The history of the site can be summarised thus.

The existing historical record suggests that the castle was the 11th century site of the local Welsh lord Cuhelyn prior to its capture by Robert FitzMartin in the Norman conquest of Pembrokeshire circa 1108. FitzMartin created Nevern as the caput for his barony of Cemais, the motte on this site is almost certainly the castle that he established. The bailey was also probably part of this castle, though it may have additionally protected the borough of 18 houses he established. Subsequent Welsh recapture of northern Pembrokeshire in 1136, following the battle of Crug Mawr, probably gave control of the site to the Welsh, and after 1156 this meant the Lord Rhys. After 1158 Rhys returned most of the captured lands he held to their Norman lords, though he recaptured many of them again in the 1160's. In 1171, after reaching a binding agreement with Henry II, he was allowed to retain his ancestral lands of Deheubarth, but returned other lands to their Norman lords. It is highly likely that the ownership of the castle had passed on to William FitzMartin (Robert's son) by 1171, especially since William married Angharad, the Lord Rhys's daughter, probably in the 1170's. Following the death of Henry II, in 1191 the Lord Rhys captured Nevern Castle from his son-in-law. Control of the castle then swapped back and forth between the Lord Rhys and two of his sons (Hywel Sais and Maelgwn ap Rhys), before the death of the Lord Rhys in 1197. In 1204 Anglo-Norman forces recaptured north Pembrokeshire including Nevern. However, it is recorded that in 1195 Hywel Sais dismantled Nevern Castle to prevent it falling into English hands. It is likely that a new castle and borough had been established in Newport by 1204 (Murphy 1994), and there is no record that Nevern castle was ever rebuilt.

The site is important because.

The Lord Rhys is the first Welsh prince recorded as building using stone and mortar. He did so at his castle of Cardigan in 1171, though the extent and nature of this construction is unknown. He was the dominant Welsh leader in South Wales from 1156 to 1194 and it is likely the tradition of Welsh masonry castle building, which is seen in later castles,



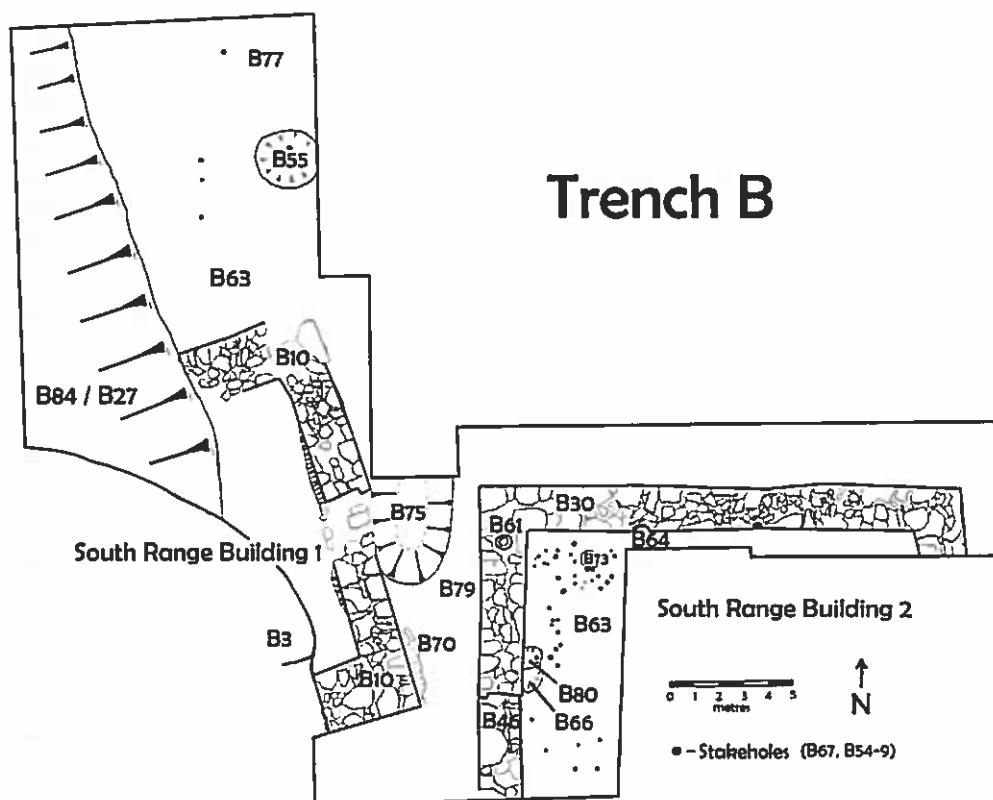
created. They form a very rough rectangle and indicate the presence of at least one timber frame building behind the defensive bank. It appears likely that this building was subsequently replaced by one based on posts, as a grid of at least 21 postholes and stakeholes have been identified and excavated in this area. Since there was no direct stratigraphic relationship between the beam slots and the posts, it is possible that the post constructed building preceded the beam based building, though this is less likely. The post based wooden building was subsequently demolished and layers of occupation debris spread over much of the area. Some of these deposits (A42) contained rounded stone boulders, much of the rest was a looser dark soil (A26) containing large amounts of charcoal and ceramic sherds. This material appears to be waste material dumped from

occupation elsewhere on the site. The ceramics were mid and late 12th century and thus it may derive from occupation in the stone buildings on the south side of the site during this period. The rounded glacial boulders had been deliberately collected from the fields in the surrounding area and brought to the site. They may have derived from an earlier building or drystone structure – where rounded boulders were the favoured building material. However, in this later phase they had been discarded, and the absence of slate in this occupation debris would suggest that slate was now the building material of choice. This occupation material almost certainly derives from the period when all the slate had been used in the construction of the buildings erected on the southern side of the site. There was evidence in the form of 'in situ' burning (A53, A51) and pits (A47) of activity on the surface of the occupation material. Subsequently some of the clay from the northern bank was redeposited over the area (A9, A23, A54). This may be equated with the slighting of the castle by Hywel Sais in 1195. Though there may have been a brief period of subsequent occupation activity

excavation but just an ephemeral spread of small stone and a little charcoal at the east end of the area. The slots probably originally held wooden posts for a further palisade, however, erosion of the bank has left very variable traces of this feature. The timbers of this palisade had been subsequently removed and a slate rich fill (D4, D5) had been pushed into the empty slots which remained. This fill suggests the presence of a slate stone revetting wall against the exterior of one of the previous phases of palisade, probably to protect against the threat of fire. All the large building stone had subsequently been removed, either for constructing masonry buildings elsewhere on the site prior to 1195; as part of Hywel Sais's slighting of the castle in 1195 or later in the site's history for building field walls. This removal left only the small stone debris on the bank, which was subsequently pushed into the open slots.

The trench DD, which was opened to provide a section through the ditch between the inner and out banks on the north site of the site, revealed a 19th century slate field drain (DD6). Excavation of this trench will be completed in 2010.

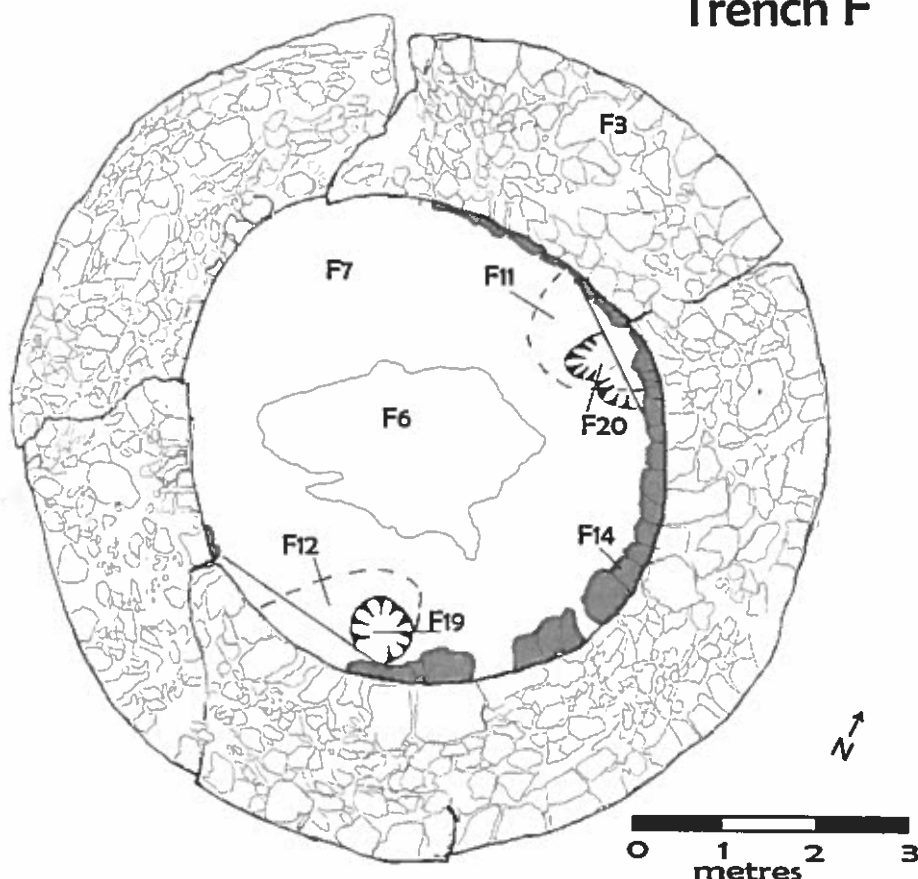
Trench B – The 9 x 3m trench of 2008 was extended with a 6 x 6m trench to the north and a 7 x 4m trench to the east. Additional trenches 7 x 2.5m further to the east and a separate 4 x 2 m trench (BB) further to the west were also partially excavated. Excavation revealed that the earliest feature on this part of the site was the natural orange clay (B63, B79, B26), within which there were a number of stake holes.



On the south side of the trench the numerous stakeholes (B67a-zk), indicated that at an early phase of occupation stakes had been inserted making some form of structure or barrier. There was occupation activity resulting in shallow pits (B80, B66) and burning (B73) on this surface. A large pit B75 was cut, possibly to obtain clay for building work, which was later filled with broken slate and shale (B74). This pit is identical in form and filling to pits A55 and A33 found on the north side of the site. A

rounded glacial stones. The walling is thus made using similar techniques to other stone buildings on site (SRB1 and SRB2). There was no entrance in the ground floor of this round tower, which consequently must have been entered at the first floor level, and was probably a two storey structure. Fragments of fired clay showed evidence of wear on one side and patterns of wood planking on the other, indicating that the round tower originally had a wooden plank first floor with clay on top to insulate it and make it fireproof. There was evidence at the ground floor level for a yellow soil floor (F7) with a central fire (F6) in the final phase of occupation of the round tower. Pottery sherds from this final phase of occupation are consistent with a late 12th century date. Two depressions F12 and F11 were noted in that floor. Beneath the floor surface there was a deposit (F9) of crushed slate waste material from the construction of the round tower and below that the brown clay (F10) of the top of the motte. The round tower had been built onto a layer of round glacial boulders (F14), laid directly on the top of the motte. There were no elaborate foundations.

Trench F



The surviving wall of the round tower contained several large cracks and sections of the wall, especially on the west side had moved out of position. The fracturing of this wall may have been the result of deliberate demolition, undermining and partially collapsing of the motte, or the round tower may have simply been too heavy and the motte had partially collapsed under its weight. The damage to the round tower may have been caused as part of Hywel Sais's slighting of the castle in 1195 or it could have been the result of an earlier attack and it led Hywel Sais to abandon the castle deeming it no longer defensible. Deep within the clay of the motte two large postholes (F19, F20) were recovered. These were almost certainly two of the original four posts that would have supported a 4m square wooden tower that surmounted Robert

A Partnership of –



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Dept of Archaeology

Funded by –



Llywodraeth Cymru
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