



Nevern Castle Excavations

Interim Report 2010 Easter Excavations

Introduction

This was the third season of excavation at Nevern Castle; a four-week excavation (March 28th – April 23rd) directed by Dr Chris Caple (Durham University) with supervisors Vicky Barker, Jon Dollery, Pete Crane (Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Archaeologist) and community archaeologist Duncan Schlee (Dyfed Archaeological Trust) working with a team of students from Durham and Lampeter Universities and local volunteers. The excavation was supported by European funding through Cadw and The Welsh Assembly with assistance from the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority. The objectives for this season's excavation were to: excavate a possible tower, surrounding courtyard and associated buildings in the Inner Castle; ascertain the extent and nature of the large stone buildings on the south side of the site; excavate a section through the northern defensive ditch; excavate an area on the western side of the bailey to discover what type of the archaeological remains were present in that area. Duncan Schlee created a diary of the progress of the excavation, details of which can be seen at: www.cambria.org.uk/nevern/neverndigdiary.html

History

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 Anglo-Norman conquest of Pembrokeshire circa 1108/9. FitzMartin created Nevern as the caput for his barony of Cemais, the motte on this site is almost certainly the castle that he established. Subsequently the Welsh recaptured much of northern Pembrokeshire in 1136, following the battle of Crug Mawr; this probably gave control of the site to the Welsh, and after 1156 this meant The Lord Rhys. In 1171, after reaching agreement with Henry II, the Lord Rhys was given the rank / role of Justiciar, allowed to retain his ancestral lands of Deheubarth but returned other lands to their Anglo-Norman lords. It is highly likely that soon after 1171 the ownership of the castle had passed to William FitzMartin (Robert's son) since William married Angharad, the Lord Rhys's daughter, at some point 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), with the Lord Rhys being held prisoner in the castle during 1194, before his death in 1197. In 1204 Anglo-Norman forces recaptured north Pembrokeshire including Nevern, though, it is recorded that in 1195 Hywel Sais dismantled Nevern Castle to prevent it falling into Anglo-Norman hands. It is likely that a new castle and borough had been established in Newport by 1204, there is no record that Nevern castle was ever rebuilt.

The previous seasons of excavation (2008 & 2009) revealed a castle built of earth and timber in the early 12th century, which was gradually being replaced in stone during the later 12th century. The castle was then suddenly destroyed, presumably the

scorching on the stonework indicated that the tower had been set alight before it was demolished. This was almost certainly the slighting of the castle by Hywel Sais in 1195. The series of smaller trenches located the outer faces of the walls of the square tower. These survived at a much higher level than expected, being found just below the turf line in most cases. The Square Tower G, was constructed at the same time as the perimeter wall (G11) of the Inner Castle to which it was fully bonded. A possible internal platform or stair feature (G9) was unearthed against the west wall.

Trench DD – was started in 2009 with a 5 x 2m trench running N-S across the northern ditch. The excavation of this trench continued in 2010 with a 0.75m wide slot cut 1.0 - 1.5m down into the ditch sediments on the west side of the trench. This ascertained that there were no archaeological structures other than the land drain (DD6) located in 2009 in the ditch, consequently the excavation of the ditch was continued using a machine. Shoring was subsequently inserted into this deep trench and excavation continued by hand down to a depth of 2.25m below the ditch surface. The results from 2009 and 2010 revealed that slow silting of the ditch had occurred throughout the medieval (DD13) and post-medieval period (DD2, DD15), whilst the interior of the castle was being farmed. A slate field drain (DD6) had been built into the base of a trench (DD3), cut through the post medieval silting (DD2) probably during the 18th or 19th century. Beneath the slow silting was a fast filled phase of the ditch (DD19, DD20, DD21), earth and slate rubble that produced some pottery and bone. This probably occurred during the late 12th century occupation. Prior to that there had been a slow silting phase (DD22) and at the base of the ditch was a roadway (DD23) which had a surface of slate and other stone, worn smooth with the passage of feet, compressed into the top of a firm grey clay soil. There was a shallow gully (DD25) in the centre of the roadway to aid drainage. Due to safety considerations we could not uncover the full width of the roadway, though it was greater than the 1.5m which was revealed. Given its depth, the banks on either side of the roadway would almost certainly have been revetted in timber to prevent them spilling down into the roadway. It appears likely that this is the early 12th century road into the castle, which suggests that a road or pathway ran around the north bank D up the ditch DD and there was an entrance into the castle just below the motte. It is uncertain where the entrance was to the castle in the later 12th century period. It is possible that the top of the slate fill layer (DD19) was the roadway in the later period, though since no coherent surface was found, it is still more likely that DD was purely a ditch in the later 12th century period.

Trench DD was extended up the north bank to meet Trench D excavated in 2009. This revealed the edge of the orange clay bank (DD16, D2) above the dark brown buried soil (DD9) which ran beneath the bank. This soil had bone, pottery and charcoal scattered over it, evidence of people living just outside the castle or living inside the castle and discarding rubbish outside the castle. This material appears to derive from the early 12th century Anglo-Norman occupation or possibly pre Anglo-Norman occupation. Since the ditch was cut through the buried soil and the bank sat directly on it, they are both early to mid 12th century features and cannot be Iron Age or Early Medieval.

Trench P – A 4 x 5m trench was excavated in the north-west corner of the Inner Castle to ascertain the nature of the buildings surrounding the square tower in the Inner Castle. Beneath the topsoil (P1) a perimeter curtain wall (P3, P4) was uncovered. Like the Square Tower G and all the other stone buildings on the site the wall was constructed of slate mortared with clay subsoil. Inside the curtain wall, beneath a layer of naturally formed soil (P2), a layer of roofing slate (P7) and 2 or 3

A further 3 x 2m trench was opened up, west of the initial trench, to recover the extent of the southern wall of this building. This established that the wall (BB6), and thus building SRB1, butted up against the wall (BB12) of an earlier building (SRB3). This meant that SRB1 is a large building, 22.3m long and 8m wide, probably a large hall. These dimensions and location opposite the proposed entrance into the castle, suggest that it may be the Great Hall of the castle, though it is unusual to find it butting onto another building – possibly a solar, chapel or tower. The Great Hall (SRB1) has walls 1.8m thick, which may imply that it was a two storey building. The trench was extended 5 x 6m north, to the edge of the later Pembrokeshire bank, which sits above the north wall of this building, this allowed us to excavate a section of the floor of the Great Hall (SRB1). Beneath a layer of good black agricultural soil (BB1, BB10) whose presence indicates that the area had been intensively farmed (evidence for ploughing and manuring) in the medieval and post medieval period, lay the hall floor (BB17, BB19), a crude clay, stone and soil layer overlain by areas of burning (BB18, BB15) and rubble (BB11) from its destruction. The walls of SRB1 are built on a good yellow-orange clay layer (BB14, BB20) but in the centre of hall, a large pit from an earlier period, filled with slate rubble and soil (BB16, BB21) appears to be emerging. The excavation of this trench will be completed in the summer season.

Trench N – An initial 5 x 2 m trench was opened up to the east of the west bank of the Bailey to ascertain the nature of the archaeological remains in this area of the castle. It was quickly extended south with a 2 x 2m extension to follow an ephemeral line of stones – which may have been the remains of a wall of a ploughed out building (N2). Below the agricultural soil layers (N1, N4) a series of stone surfaces N6 and N12 as well as postholes began to emerge. These appeared to be compacted stone and earth floors associated with wooden buildings. It was clear that it would not be possible to understand these buildings given the small area which had been thus far excavated, consequently the trench was extended, using a machine to remove the turf and agricultural soil. This created a trench nearly 8 x 8m, with a 4 x 2m extension to touch the back of the west bank. This allowed us to see the relationship the bank (castle defences) and the buildings within the castle. The initial cleaning of this trench area revealed that the west bank (N19) was probably made of a clay core, covered with slate excavated from the west ditch. This slate appeared to have slumped across the west side of the bailey (N20) forming a surface (N12) which had become compacted as people walked on it. It was into this surface that post holes (N17) had been cut for one or more wooden buildings. There were reasonable quantities of earthenware pottery, consistent with a late 12th century date, retrieved from layers N4 and N9 directly above the compacted stone floors. This would suggest occupation and use of structures, possibly domestic structures such as houses or kitchens, occurred in this part of the castle in the late 12th century occupation of the site. The excavation of this trench will be completed in the summer season.

Summary: This season's excavations enabled us to make good progress in revealing and understanding the structures of the 12th century occupation of Nevern Castle. The excavations on the north bank and in the Inner Castle have not revealed any evidence of Iron Age or Early medieval occupation at Nevern Castle, in places where we would have expected to find it. We have, however, found that all the evidence so far recovered from the site points to two major phases of 12th construction and occupation of the site. The early 12th century saw not only the motte (Trench F) and wooden buildings (Trench A) recovered in 2009, but there is evidence for construction of a