

# Nevern Castle Excavations

## Interim Report 2010 Summer Excavations

### Introduction

This was the fourth season of excavation at Nevern Castle; a four-week excavation (June 20<sup>th</sup> – July 16<sup>th</sup>) directed by Dr Chris Caple (Durham University) with supervisors, Jon Dollery and Sam Pamment (Lampeter University), site draughtswoman Vicky Barker and community archaeologists Pete Crane (Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Archaeologist) and Paula Jones (Dyfed Archaeological Trust) working with a team of students from Durham, Cardiff and Lampeter Universities as well as many local volunteers. The excavation was financed by European and Welsh Assembly funding administered through Cadw with considerable assistance from the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority and Nevern Community Council. The objectives for this season's excavation were to: excavate a possible square tower and surrounding courtyard 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 bank and uncover an area on the western side of the bailey to discover what type of archaeological remains were present in that area. Pete and Paula maintained a diary of the progress of the excavation, details of which can be seen at: [www.cambria.org.uk/nevern/neverndigdiary.html](http://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 Ceredigion in 1136, following the battle of Crug Mawr; this may have given control of much of northern Pembrokeshire including Nevern 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 of Justiciar, 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 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 1189, 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 sons (Hywel Sais, Grufydd and Maelgwn), with the Lord Rhys being held prisoner in the castle during 1194, before his death in 1197. It is recorded that in 1195 Hywel Sais dismantled Nevern Castle to prevent it falling into Anglo-Norman hands and in 1204 Anglo-Norman forces recaptured north Pembrokeshire including Nevern. It is likely that a new castle and borough had been established in Newport by 1204 and there is no record that Nevern castle was ever rebuilt.

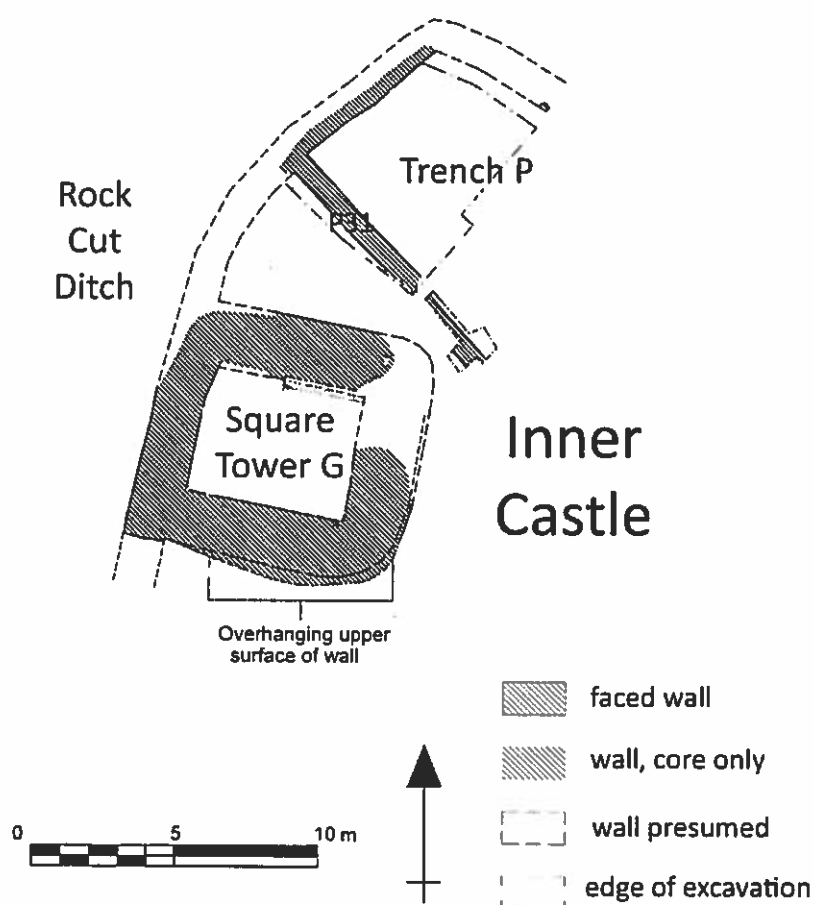
surfaces were a series of postholes that were shallow and probably formed the seating for the posts of a wooden framed building, which had probably been replaced on at least one occasion. The post holes did not form clear lines to show the location of walls and much of the building probably lay in the unexcavated area north of trench N. As the excavations at Hen Domen have shown it is necessary to excavate very large areas of a castle in order to reveal the full extent of this type of wooden building. This structure was probably connected with the early to mid 12<sup>th</sup> century occupation of the castle, when wooden buildings were the norm. Outside this building, to the south, was a large pit (N16) filled with waste (N40) from this early to mid 12<sup>th</sup> century occupation. This pit was later filled in with surfacing material (N38). The lowest worn slate surface in trench N, (N20), was formed from slate which had spilled out into the bailey from the construction of the west bank (N19) of the castle. This bank had been formed from the clay and slate upcast of the outer ditch and possibly the pit (N16). If this western bank is similar to the north bank it was probably built by Robert FitzMartin when he constructed his initial castle on the site in 1108/1109.

**Trench E** – A 3 x 2m trench was opened on the top of the western bank, to ascertain the nature of the barrier, stone wall or wooden palisade, which would have sat on top of the bank. Late and post medieval soil deposits from the degradation of the motte and bank (E1, E2, E4, E5) were excavated, beneath them was the clay top of the medieval bank E3. No trace of the barrier which originally topped the bank was recovered. It was almost certainly destroyed when the castle was slighted in 1195. Further excavation will be required to determine what type of barrier originally topped the western rampart.

**Trench BB** – The 5 x 6m trench opened up over Easter in the centre of the large (22 x 8m) building SRB1, which is possibly the Great Hall of the late 12<sup>th</sup> century castle, continued to be excavated through this summer season. The floor of the hall (BB17, BB19), a crude clay, stone and soil layer had been overlain by traces of burning (BB18, BB15) and rubble (BB11) from the building's destruction. Beneath the walls of SRB1 were deposits of yellow-orange clay layer (BB14, BB20) which, upon excavation, proved to be clay banks, probably constructed in the early 12<sup>th</sup> century. Between them and beneath the floor were not pits, as originally thought in 2009 and Easter 2010, but a large ditch. This originally ran between the banks and formed the southern defence to Robert FitzMartin's initial castle when it was constructed circa 1108/9. These banks and ditch were not as large as those on the north and west sides, since the precipitous slope on the southern side already provided considerable natural defence. The lack of silting present in the ditch suggested that it was filled in soon after it had been created. The ditch was shallow, only dug down into the top of the grey glacial slate debris (BB44, BB47) which forms the natural undisturbed ground on this part of the site. The clay banks were created from the orange glacial clay subsoil found over much of the rest of the site. There were few finds in the ditch fill. The terminal end of the ditch lay beyond the east gable end of building SRB1. The unstable fill of this ditch led to subsidence beneath this wall, which was probably why this gable end, excavated in 2009, showed several phases of rebuilding.

**Trench D** - Excavation of the outer northern bank of the castle had initially been started in 2008, when the turf from the top of the bank was removed and the evidence of wooden palisade structures, revealed as 3 phases of post holes, stake holes and slots, was uncovered. The discovery at Easter 2010, when the ditch south of the north bank was excavated, of the original soil level present before the bank was built meant that the dimensions of the bank and the level of the archaeology beneath it

charcoal (P9) almost certainly from the burning and destruction of the castle in 1195. Below that the courtyard surface (P10, P34). There was little sign of occupation debris on the courtyard surface. Beneath the courtyard there was a dark organic soil (P41) with pottery and bone, evidence of occupation either here or elsewhere in the castle. It was noticeable that the foundations of the wall (P31) were thicker and wider (P33) over areas of such organic debris, clearly the builders of the stone construction phase of the Inner Castle knew where this soft midden material was and compensated. Beneath that were soil deposits (P42) slate debris (from the ditch construction) (P20) and the soil bank (P19) from the initial creation of the Inner Castle. There would appear to have been a break after this initial phase of construction phase, when the rock cut ditch and soil bank (P19) were created, when there was a periods of occupation (occupation debris P41, some wooden structures P35, P36, P37, buildings and the odd pit P21/P22 were dug) before the completion phase of the Inner castle when the stone buildings (Curtain Wall P3, P4, Platform P31 and later the Square Tower G (G2, G3, G4, G5) were constructed. Whilst it is possible that the initial ditch, bank was early 12<sup>th</sup> century and the stone building was late 12<sup>th</sup> century, it appears more probable that all activity in the Inner Castle is mid to late 12<sup>th</sup> century, with merely a short break in the construction work. There is some evidence for structures connected with the initial phase of construction with a few post holes (P47, P24, p43, P44) in the bank P19 before the bank of this bank was covered in the slate (P20). The initial phase of activity in this area, the reasons for which are not obvious, comprised the digging of a pit P48 and piling up the turf south of the hole. All this activity took place on the mottled grey and yellow layer P27, the remains of the natural turf surface of this area, which lies above an undisturbed natural soil (P50, P51, P28) and subsoil (P29).



the case of the north bank had 3 phases of wooden defences. The last of these palisade defences probably had a stone wall without any foundations associated with it. At this time there was a wooden watchtower based on 4 large posts on top of the motte. Inside both the north and west banks were buildings based on wooden frame structures.

#### Mid to late 12<sup>th</sup> century

The wooden defences and internal buildings were rebuilt in slate mortared with the clay sub-soil from the site. We currently have a square tower, a round tower and three rectangular stone buildings all from the late 12<sup>th</sup> century on this site built in this way. This is the largest concentration of 12<sup>th</sup> century buildings on a single site in Wales outside Glamorgan, and there are almost certainly traces of more stone buildings to be recovered from this site. Such a complete rebuilding of the castle would have taken considerable time and a considerable amount of money. The towers were strong, highly visible, defensive elements and with the new rock cut ditch of the Inner Castle had significantly increased the defensive capabilities of the castle. The stone buildings at the top of the southern slope, which overlay the earlier 12<sup>th</sup> century earthen defences, were visible to all those travelling up the valley from St David's to Cardigan, a clear display of wealth. Thus the rebuilding was a functional and symbolic demonstration of power and control. Such a display of wealth and military strength would have made Nevern a very desirable castle to own, one of the strongest and most substantial in West Wales at this date. There are a number of possible people who could have rebuilt Nevern castle in stone and a number of different dates when it could have been done.

After 1136 and the battle of Crug Mawr it is uncertain if Robert FitzMartin retained control of Cemais. Bruce Coplestone Crow researching the FitzMartin family has recently confirmed that there are no documents issued by Robert FitzMartin from his lands in Cemais, though he is recorded as active in his lands in Devon and Dorset in this period. Equally there is no mention of Nevern being besieged or captured in the conflicts between Welsh and Anglo-Norman forces across Pembrokeshire and Ceredigion between 1135 and 1170's. Various Welsh leaders held sway in Ceredigion and possibly north Pembrokeshire though none controlled the area for long enough or have any history of building stone castles elsewhere. Though Henry II had regained control of the area in 1158, as Robert FitzMartin probably died, in his 80's, in the late 1150's it seems unlikely that he would be involved in a substantial castle building project at this time. His son William is still very young, probably a ward of Henry II, and thus not in a position to build a castle. From 1165 the Lord Rhys appears to again be in control of the area and it is possible he constructed the castle on the site. It remains unlikely that he would construct such an expensive castle on lands he did not own and was far from certain of keeping. The most likely period of construction is the early 1170's when William FitzMartin regains control of Cemais following agreement between the Lord Rhys and Henry II and marries Angharad, the Lord Rhys's daughter. Following the settlement the Lord Rhys is recorded as building in stone at Cardigan Castle, indicating a period of stability and peace when castle construction was possible. Once William FitzMartin had come of age and started to control his lands he would doubtless have wished to impress his new bride and her powerful father, this he could have done through reconstructing the castle of Nevern. It would also make his mark on a territory which his father had initially conquered 60 years earlier.

It has been suggested by Bruce Coplestone Crow and Paul Remfry that William FitzMartin formally came of age (21) in 1176 and that this was the most likely date at