

Nevern Castle Excavations

Interim Report 2011 Summer Excavations

Introduction

This was the fifth season of excavation at Nevern Castle; a three week excavation (June 19th – July 8th) directed by Dr Chris Caple (Durham University) with deputy director Pete Crane (Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Archaeologist); supervisors, Sam Pamment (Lampeter University), Ed Burton (Durham University), site assistant Chris Chinnock and finds assistant Vicky Singleton working with a team of students from Durham, Cardiff and Lampeter Universities as well as many local volunteers. The excavation was supported by the estate of the late Ray Caple, Cardiff University and the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority. The objectives for this season's excavation were to reveal what lay at the southern corner of the site (a third tower?), excavate on the motte outside the Round Tower (Tower F) to discover the nature of any access or defences, to excavate the inside of the Square Tower (Tower G) in the Inner Castle and to explore the possibility of further buildings along the south side of the Bailey.

History

The existing historical record indicates 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. He also founded a borough of 18 burgage plots on this site and established the abbey of St Dogmaels. 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 and after William FitzMartin had left on crusade with Richard I, in 1191 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 sons (Hywel Sais, Gruffydd 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 Nevern Castle disappears from the written record.

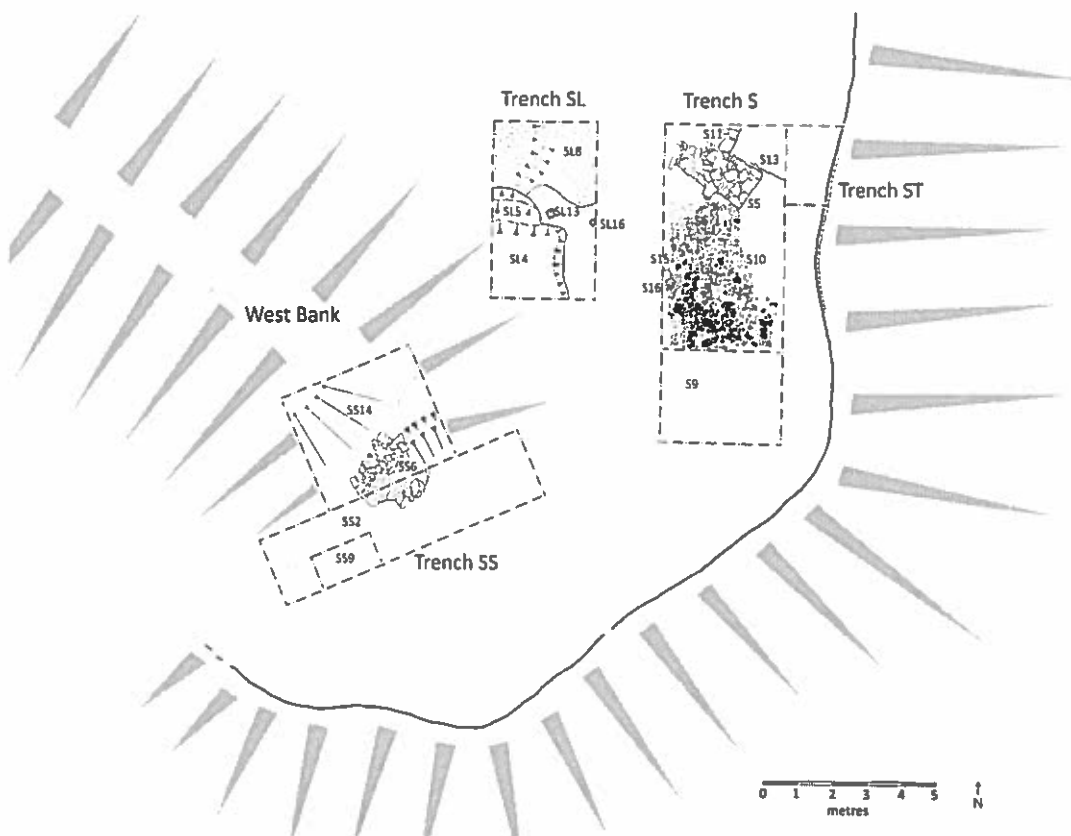
The previous seasons of excavation (2008, 2009, 2010 [Easter], 2010 [Summer]) revealed a castle built of earth and timber in the early 12th century, which was

century. Beneath the midden were a series of construction deposits (F30, F29, F33) associated with the construction of the wall of the round tower (F3). This material sat directly on the stiff brown clay of the motte (F34, F10). There were no deposits associated with the early 12th century occupation and it appears that this was removed and the top of the motte reduced in height (0.5 - 1.5m) before the round tower was built in the late 12th century. There was no evidence of any defensive palisade or other structure present in the late 12th century; traces from the early 12th century would have been lost along with the top of the motte. There was also no evidence for a walkway around the outside of the tower in the late 12th century, nor any evidence, on this east side, of the wooden staircase which would have been necessary to gain access to the first floor entrance of the round tower. This must therefore presumably lie on the north or south sides of the tower.

Trench G – During the conservation of this structure during the winter of 2010-2011, a 1.5m deep square section hole appeared in the north east corner of the tower. The conservation work had consolidated and strengthened the walls of the tower, so this summer we were able to excavate safely inside the square tower, investigate the square hole and recover information about the construction, occupation and destruction of the tower. Initial work cleared the exterior face of the north wall (G3) and the north east corner. This corner was rounded, in an identical manner to the south east corner. This well preserved feature, which is unique to this site (see Interim Summer 2010), appears to have been created since slate with clay mortar structures are much stronger with rounded corners than right angles. Inside the tower, beneath the slate rubble (G8, G20, G22) which derive from the collapse of the building, there was evidence of burning (G25) including a thick layer of charcoal (G26). The heat inside the building had been so intense (>1000°C) it had partially melted some of the slate, causing pieces of slate to drape like cloth and the surface of the slate to bubble up. Excavation uncovered offsets on the north (G30) and east (G29) walls. These would have supported wooden beams and a wooden plank floor (G35), at a level similar to the present soil level inside the tower. About 30-40cms below the wooden floor was a sub floor of grey slaty soil (G27). The air gap meant that the wooden floor stayed dry and did not rot. The north and east walls were not faced below the offset level, thus they were not meant to be seen and this wooden floor was the lowest floor level in the tower, i.e. there was no basement or dungeon. The west wall of the tower (G4) is faced to a much lower level and does not have an offset. This indicates that this wall was built first as part of the perimeter wall of the Inner Castle, and the tower (walls G2, G3 and G5) was added at a later date. As the walls of the tower were being built soil (G27) was piled up inside to give a firm foundation and aid access for construction. To aid the building of the upper levels of the tower large wooden posts were sunk into this earth (G27). Erected in the north east and south east corners these posts supported a timber scaffold and helped form the internal corners of the tower. After the building was complete these posts were cut off at the level of the offset so the wooden floor could go all the way across. The base of the post remained in situ and subsequently rotted away leaving large deep square holes, one of which was uncovered during last winter's conservation work. Against the west wall G4, instead of the soil (G27), there was a 0.8m wide strip composed of a series of layers of horizontal slate often with soil and rubble between (G9, G24, G32, G31). Immediately east of these layers were a series of deposits of near vertical slates (G33, G23). The horizontal layers appear to be soil and slate banks with slate surfaces built up against wall G4 when it was the perimeter wall before Tower G was constructed. These banks may have served as wall walks (platforms behind the wall on which the defenders could stand) or banks on which the builders could stand as they built up the height of the

late 12th and early 13th century before the substantial demolition of the walls in the later 13th century. It is possible the site acted as a quarry providing stone for the new castle constructed by the Lords of Cemais in Newport in the mid 13th century.

Beneath the cobble roadway there was an earlier road surface (S9) grey slate soil on top of the natural clay and bedrock. Probably associated with this early road surface was a pair of postholes (S19, S20), possibly part of a wooden, 4 or 6 post, gateway structure. Similar structures have been uncovered at sites such as Penmaen Castle (Glamorgan) and Rumney Castle (Gwent). This timber gateway had been removed and the postholes filled in (S20, S19) before the cobble road surface (S10) was laid. On the edge of the southern slope along which the road ran before it turned into the gateway, a well made wall of horizontal slate mortared with clay (ST2) had been constructed. This was a similar type of construction to wall S11 and was probably created to revet the slope and ensure the cobbled surfaced road (S10) did not slide down the slope. Later the wall was poorly repaired (ST3) which, since it was undertaken using the large stone boulders from the demolished castle walls, occurred in the later medieval period when the site was used for agriculture. Since the entrance and the emphasis of the castle in the early 12th century was on the north side, these 4 phases of entrance probably all occur in the late 12th century, between 1171 and 1204.

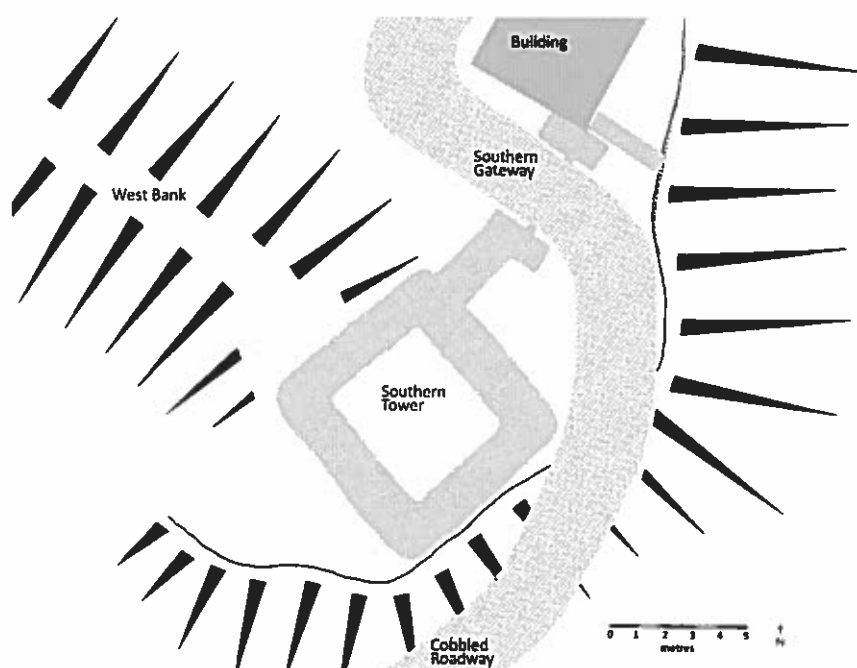


In Summary:

- Southern Gateway Phase 1: early road surface (S9) and post holes ((S22, S21) of a timber gateway
- Southern Gateway Phase 2: cobbled road surface (S10) revetting wall (ST2) supporting the roadway, slate and clay mortared wall or buildings (S11).
- Southern Gateway Phase 3: well made gritstone block entrance (S5) with vertical slate threshold (S6)
- Southern Gateway Phase 4?: a period of use, occupation material dropped and a soil developed (S7)

of the west bank was cut back to reveal its make up and structures built into it. Subsequently a 2m x 1m slot was cut into the ground below the section to ascertain its relationship to ground level of the 12th century. A 3 x 4m trench was also opened up on top of the bank above this section to more fully reveal structures located in the section.

The excavation of the slot revealed a possible stone filled post hole (SS10) on the line of the bank cut into the natural soil (SS9). This is possibly one of a series of marker posts or a palisade erected by Robert FitzMartin to mark the line of, or protect the construction of the western defences of his initial castle. The initial bank formed was of clay subsoil (SS8, SS2) upcast from the ditch being dug west of the bank. This bank was raised with a deposit of clay subsoil with slate fragments (SS3), again upcast from the ditch excavation. Subsequently a large amount of loose slate (SS4), quarried from the base of the ditch, was thrown up behind the clay bank both raising it and broadening it. It is unclear what capped this bank, no trace of palisade or other wooden feature would survive on this virtual scree slope of a bank. It is likely that this represents the early 12th century bank of Robert FitzMartin's castle. Subsequently a clay mortared slate wall (SS6, SS15) was built into the loose bank material (SS4). This construction is typical of the late 12th century clay mortared construction of William FitzMartin. This wall cuts into the back of the bank; it is not faced and is clearly part of a larger mortared slate construction most of which has been demolished and the slate removed. The ground in front of this south end of the west bank is flat, and it appears likely that the early 12th century bank was cut back in the late 12th century and a large clay mortared slate tower erected here, though all that now remains is a small fragment of wall almost covered by the bank. The exact form and dimensions of the original tower are not be known, but it would have overlooked the road which approached the castle from the south, and provided considerable protection to the gateway (See Trench 5) into the castle, as all seeking access would have to skirt past this tower. Similar gateway arrangements are present circa 1150-1189 at Newcastle, Bridgend as well as early 13th century examples at Chepstow and Dinas Bran. Excavation above the section, at the top of the bank, revealed the extent of the clay mortared late 12th century wall and associated rubble foundation (SS16) probably used for a step, onto the top of the bank. The material at the top of the bank subsequently eroded over the top of demolished wall (SS14, SS5) so hiding and preserving it.



were added slightly later to form the Square Tower G, which had rounded exterior corners for greater structural stability. Evidence now suggests that Round Tower F had high status domestic occupation on its upper floors and a midden outside. The basement of Round Tower F remains the most likely site for the imprisonment of the Lord Rhys in 1194.

A new late 12th century southern entrance to the castle has been revealed. Four phases of building and rebuilding of the gateway have been revealed, an initial wooden one, probably William FitzMartin's initial refortification of the castle, then two longer lived ones in stone, the latter with well cut stone blocks. The final wooden gateway phase provides clear evidence for a post slighting period of occupation / defence. There appears to have been a significant change in the focus of the castle from the north side of the castle in the early 12th century, which probably used an entrance off the original roadway (now a partially filled in sunken lane) which took visitors past the pilgrims cross, to a late 12th century focus on the south side of the castle. This later castle had stone buildings along its southern edge, stone revetting walls and a stone gateway entrance that used a new road which turned sharply up the southern slope and then entered the castle past a giant tower above a steep slope/cliff through a gateway which required a further sharp turn. Especially from the south it was an impressive looking castle and entrance, clearly visible to all passing along the road between St David's and Cardigan. Work is now underway cleaning, revealing and recording the images scratched on the pieces of slate recovered from the threshold of this southern entrance into the castle, this will no doubt provide fascinating information about the beliefs and ideas of the people who built and lived in Nevern Castle in the late 12th century.

Dr Chris Caple – August 2011

A Partnership of –



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