

PEMBROKESHIRE

NEVERN CASTLE 2008-2015; CLOSING IN ON THE FIRST WELSH MASONRY CASTLE ?

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Introduction

Nevern Castle (SN 082 401). The history, geophysical survey and description of Nevern Castle, as well as the initial results from the first four seasons of excavations, were reported in *Medieval Archaeology* 55. This paper updates that initial report. Excavations continue to be directed by Dr Chris Caple for a partnership of Nevern Community Council, The Pembrokeshire Coast National Park and Durham University Department of Archaeology who are researching, conserving and developing this site. All the annual Interim Reports are available on the Durham University website¹ and excavations are planned to continue on the site until 2018.

The Early 12th Century Earth and Timber Castle.

To date no prehistoric features have been unearthed from this site, the massive banks and ditches which form the castle are all 12th century. The discovery of a series of fine plough-marks beneath the castle's motte this summer (2015) has provided the first evidence for pre Norman activity on this site (site phase 2), a rare glance at Welsh agricultural activity of the late 11th early / 12th century, (Fig 1). These furrows are, at 15-20cms between crests, closer together than those seen beneath mottes such as Hen Domen and may derive from a number of seasons ploughing in the same direction.



FIG 1: Nevern Castle, the construction of the motte preserved these ridges which derive from multiple seasons of ploughing cutting down into the top of the subsoil. Photograph © Chris Caple.

The presence of agricultural activity does suggest that the castle was near the Welsh settlement of Nevern / Nanhyfer, which presumably lay close to the early Christian stone monuments and church of St Brynach in the floor of the valley. The earliest Anglo Norman activity on the site is a spread of occupation material containing 12th century ceramics, probably the remains of occupation behind a banked and ditched enclosure created to protect the Anglo-Norman forces of Robert FitzMartin who captured the Welsh cantref of Cemais circa 1108 (Fig 2 – Phase 3). This occupation earth was cut through by ditches and buried beneath the banks of a substantial earth and timber castle which was then erected on this site. The motte may date either from the earliest Anglo-Norman occupation or this later castle construction. The large banks and ditches visible today formed a triangular shaped castle, with an entrance on the

southern side and a motte at the apex, surmounted with a substantial four post structure (Fig 2 - Phase 4). This was probably created around 1115/6 in response to the warlike activities throughout West Wales of Gruffudd, son of Rhys ap Tewdwr, (Davies 1987, 43; Jones 1955, 83-101). After the initial conquest of Cemais, presumably with a large military force, FitzMartin's emphasis shifted from attack to defence, creating the earth and timber castle which could be protected with a smaller and more sustainable number of armed men. To the east of the castle there was a defended enclosure, almost certainly occupied by the settlement mentioned by the 16th century antiquarian George Owen who refers to 18 burgage plots on the site (Miles 1998, 26). Evidence for a timber faced wooden framed earthwork, rising vertically above a rock cut ditch, defending the east side of this settlement, was uncovered in 2011. On the north side the settlement (*tref*) was protected by a large earthen defensive bank, which ran east from the motte and was surmounted with substantial wooden palisade. The palisade slot on the north bank excavated in 2015 proved to be 1.2m deep, indicating that substantial timbers surmounted the crest of the bank. Robert FitzMartin was clearly intent on defending the settlement as well as the castle (Figure 2 – Phase 4). The presence of castles such as Dyffryn Mawr, Pen yr Allt (Llantod) and Castell Hendre (Henry's Castle) located in the outlying districts of Cemais indicates the control exercised over the whole of Cemais by FitzMartin and his subordinates. However, the defeat of Anglo-Norman forces at the battle of Crug Mawr outside Cardigan in 1136, changed the balance of power and it is unclear who controlled Nevern Castle and Cemais in the succeeding decades. The extensive silting in both the inner northern ditch and that between the castle and town would, together with the absence of any documents sent from Nevern by FitzMartin, suggest a period of Anglo-Norman abandonment of the site (Phase 5).

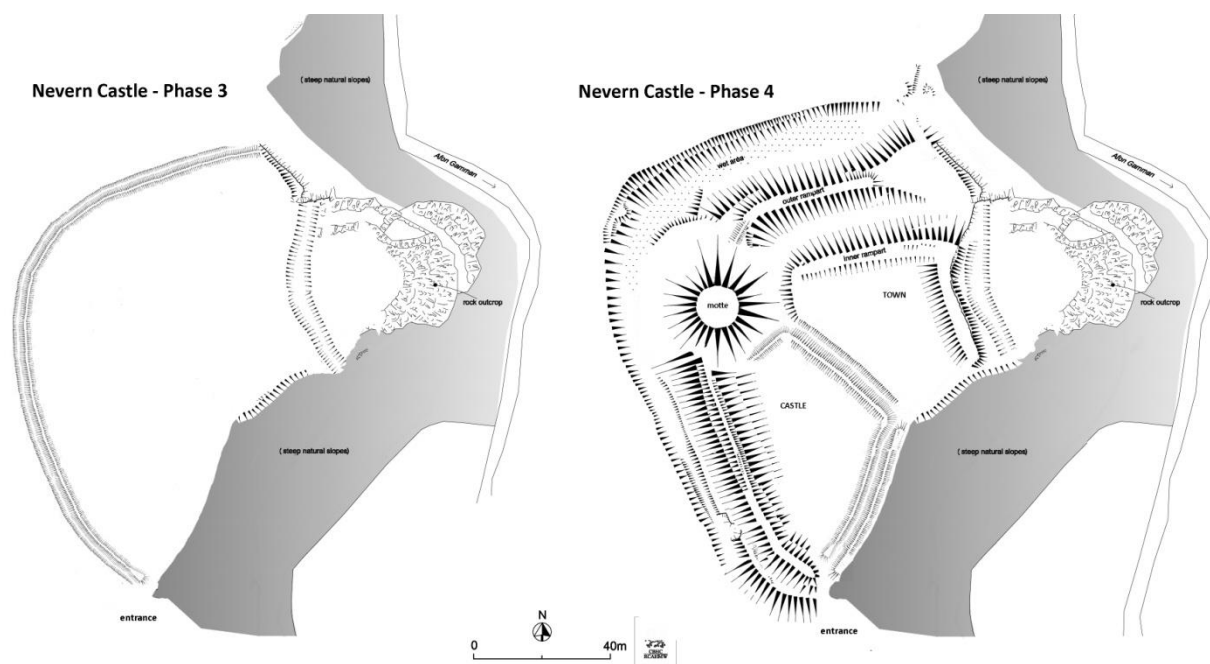


FIG 2: Nevern Castle - Revised Earth and Timber Phases (3 & 4). Drawing © Chris Caple from the RCAHMW plan of Nevern Castle.

The Mid and Late 12th Century Stone Castle

By the late 12th century, a castle with stone buildings and defences had been built on this site. The archaeological evidence indicates a substantial fire followed by physical destruction overwhelmed all the buildings before the end of the 12th century since Saintonge and other pottery forms seen in 13th century castles in Wales are absent from Nevern. This corresponds to historical references to the slighting of the castle in 1195 (Remfrey 2007, 99), thus the phases of stone building and associated occupation excavated on this site must occur before 1195. This suggests that the conversion of Nevern Castle from an earth and timber castle to stone starts around the middle of the 12th century and filled the whole of the area occupied by the earlier castle and settlement. Prior to 1158 it is likely Cemais was still under Welsh control, which from 1155 meant the Lord Rhys (Rhys ap Gruffudd). Following Rhys's submission to Henry in 1171-2

lands in West Wales came back into Anglo Norman control, however, since Robert FitzMartin died in 1159 and his son William was a minor, it seems unlikely there was time for a substantial phase of castle building before control of Cemais passed back to Lord Rhys's in 1165, following his capture of Carmarthen and Cardigan (Davies 1987, 52-3). Cemais and Nevern Castle only reverted back to FitzMartin control in the 1170s following William's marriage to Angharad, the Lord Rhys's daughter. Thus the Lord Rhys, may be responsible for building in stone on this site between the 1150's and 1170's. All the mid and late 12th century buildings were constructed of the local slate mortared with local clay, a local building technique which continued in this area well into the 19th century. One of the first stone buildings (Phase 6) on the site was a circular tower; a two or three storey vertical sided circular tower with first floor entrance, constructed on top of the motte, which had been reduced in height to accommodate this stone construction. A layer of glacial boulders provided the only crude foundation. On the south side of the castle, South Range Building 3 (Fig 3) was constructed above the edge of the steep southern slope. This building is interpreted as the Great Hall of the castle and a curtain wall ran west to a new gateway in the south west corner. The gable end of the Great Hall formed part of the southern defensive perimeter of the castle; incorporating buildings into the defensive perimeter of the site is a feature often seen in Welsh castles such as Dolwyddelan and Dolbadarn. South Range Buildings 1 and 2, interpreted as a domestic range and a Great Chamber / Solar, were added to the north east of the Great Hall (Fig 3). In addition to the clay mortared slate, these buildings incorporated squared faced gritstone blocks for the doorcases and as quoins at the building corners. The gritstone blocks also refaced the gateway making an impressive entrance to the castle. Other buildings probably filled the castle site, however, agricultural activity in the 18th and 19th century ploughed away their remains.

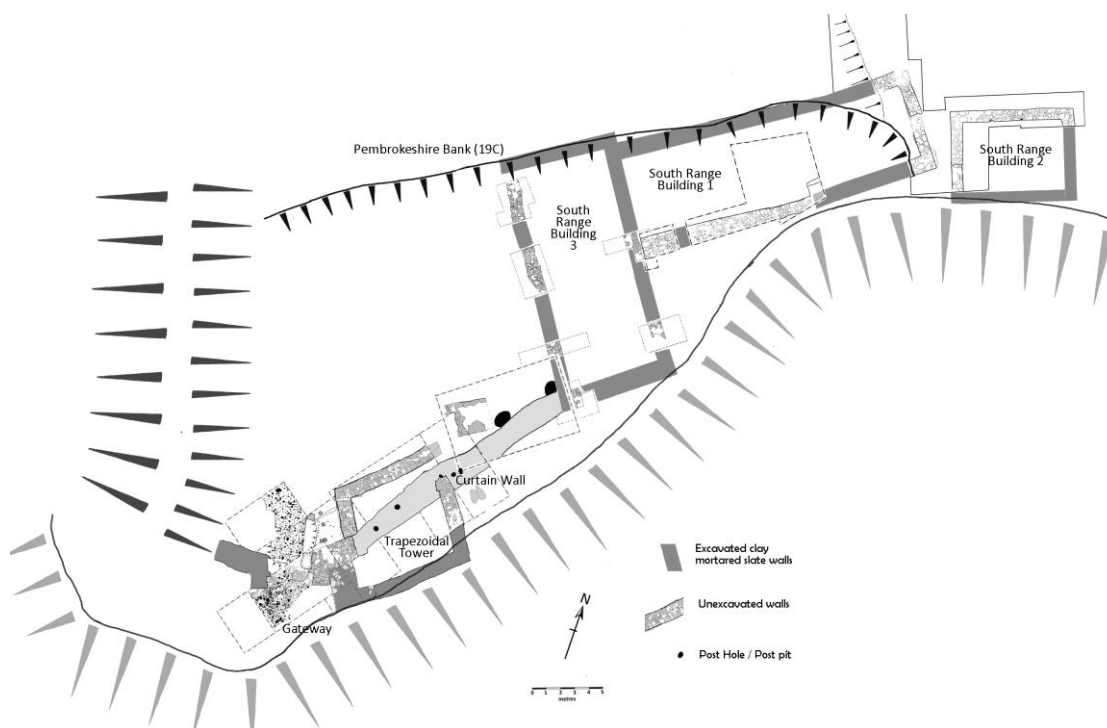


FIG 3: The South Range of Buildings and Gateway complex. Drawing © Chris Caple

At some point after its construction the curtain wall south of South Range Building 3 was slighted and a large wooden palisade (evidenced by post holes) was then constructed on the same line as the curtain wall. This was later removed when a large Trapezoidal Tower (Phase 7) was constructed atop the demolished curtain wall overlooking the steep southern slope and the Gateway, Figure 3. Through the late 12th century there was a substantial period of occupation – giving rise to a gradual accumulation of stratified deposits containing pottery, especially in the base of the trapezoidal tower. It is possible that there was a revetting wall cut into the side of the hill to defend the southern side of the castle, but no evidence of such a structure has been recovered as this is an actively eroding slope as evidenced by the

collapse of the southern wall of the Trapezoidal Tower. The South Range Buildings appear to continue to be part of the defensive circuit of the site. On the north and west banks of the castle, a narrow clay mortared slate curtain wall, <1m wide, replaced the wooden palisade.

During this late 12th century period the castle was extended to the east, with the construction of a curtain wall around the edge of a rock outcrop, to form an Inner Ward or Inner Castle (King and Perks 1950-1) (Fig 4). Initially occupied with a hall (Hall P) at its northern end, this was later replaced by a large square tower with rounded corners on the west side (Tower G). Rounded corners, also seen on halls at 12th century castle sites such as Llantrithyd and Penmaen, derive either from using clay mortar, a weaker bonding agent than lime mortar, and / or the absence of suitable large stones for quoins, as in the case of the tower at Newnham Castle, Kent. Excavations this summer (2015) in the base of the ditch protecting the Inner Castle, revealed that the ditch was being quarried out of the local rock; slate, which was then being used in the construction of the Inner Castle. The quarrying appears to have been interrupted, wooden tools and a pottery cresset lamp (Fig 5) were found abandoned in the base of the workings at the north end of the ditch, whilst the bedrock quarrying had barely started at the southern end. Beside this area a series of rounded stone projectiles were uncovered in summer 2010 littering the courtyard south of Tower G; the only evidence of a siege / military action in this part of the castle. It is probable this derives from the siege and capture of the castle in 1191 by The Lord Rhys after William FitzMartin had left on the crusades [despite having sworn on holy relics not to do so (Thorpe 1978, 171)]. He may have been concerned that once the rock cut ditch (8m wide and 8m deep) was completed, the Inner Castle would become an impregnable stronghold which could be held against him, barely 10 miles from his own castle at Cardigan.

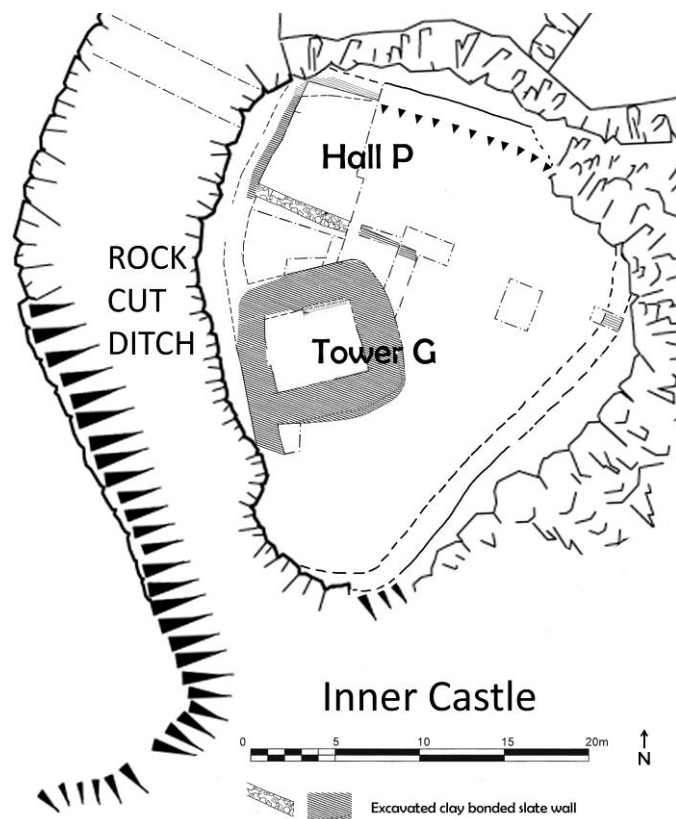


FIG 4: The Inner Castle of Nevern Castle. Drawing © Chris Caple from the RCAHMW plan of Nevern Castle.



FIG 5: Cresset Lamp with a bowl lip sooted from use. Photograph © Jeff Veitch & Chris Caple

Castles were always more than just a series of physical defences, their military effectiveness was equally reliant on the defenders who manned them. The excavation of the Gateway in 2011 produced a series of slates bearing apotropaic symbols (Fig 6), which have been described in detail elsewhere (Caple 2011). Found in situ, the slates were buried on edge to form the threshold to this castle, the symbols only visible to malevolent spirits, who were widely believed to be repelled or delayed by the symbols and so would thus not enter the castle. Widespread belief in such spirits is evidenced by the writings of contemporary writers such as Giraldus Cambrensis (Thorpe 1978). The context provided by the Nevern Castle examples helps explain the function of similarly inscribed slates recovered at sites such as Inchmarnock and Tintagel which had lost their original context. The slates speak of the fears and beliefs of the local Welsh peasantry involved in rebuilding this castle in stone. The importance of keeping the morale of defenders high is emphasised by the decision of Hywel Sais to abandon Nevern Castle and slight it in 1195, almost certainly as a result of the loss of many of his men killed whilst unsuccessfully trying to defend St Clear's castle against Anglo-Norman forces.

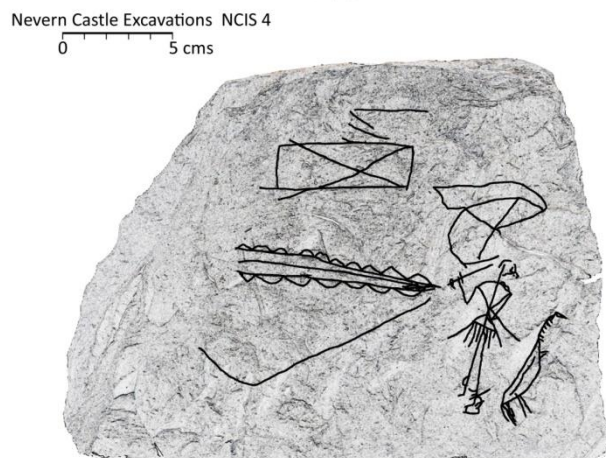


FIG 6: Slate inscribed with apotropaic symbols; saltire, warrior and horse images, as well as symbols not previously seen or documented. Enhanced photographic image Photograph © Jeff Veitch & Chris Caple.

References

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Footnotes

- 1 - <http://www.dur.ac.uk/archaeology/research/projects/?mode=project&id=405>