



# Nevern Castle Excavations

## Interim Report 2008

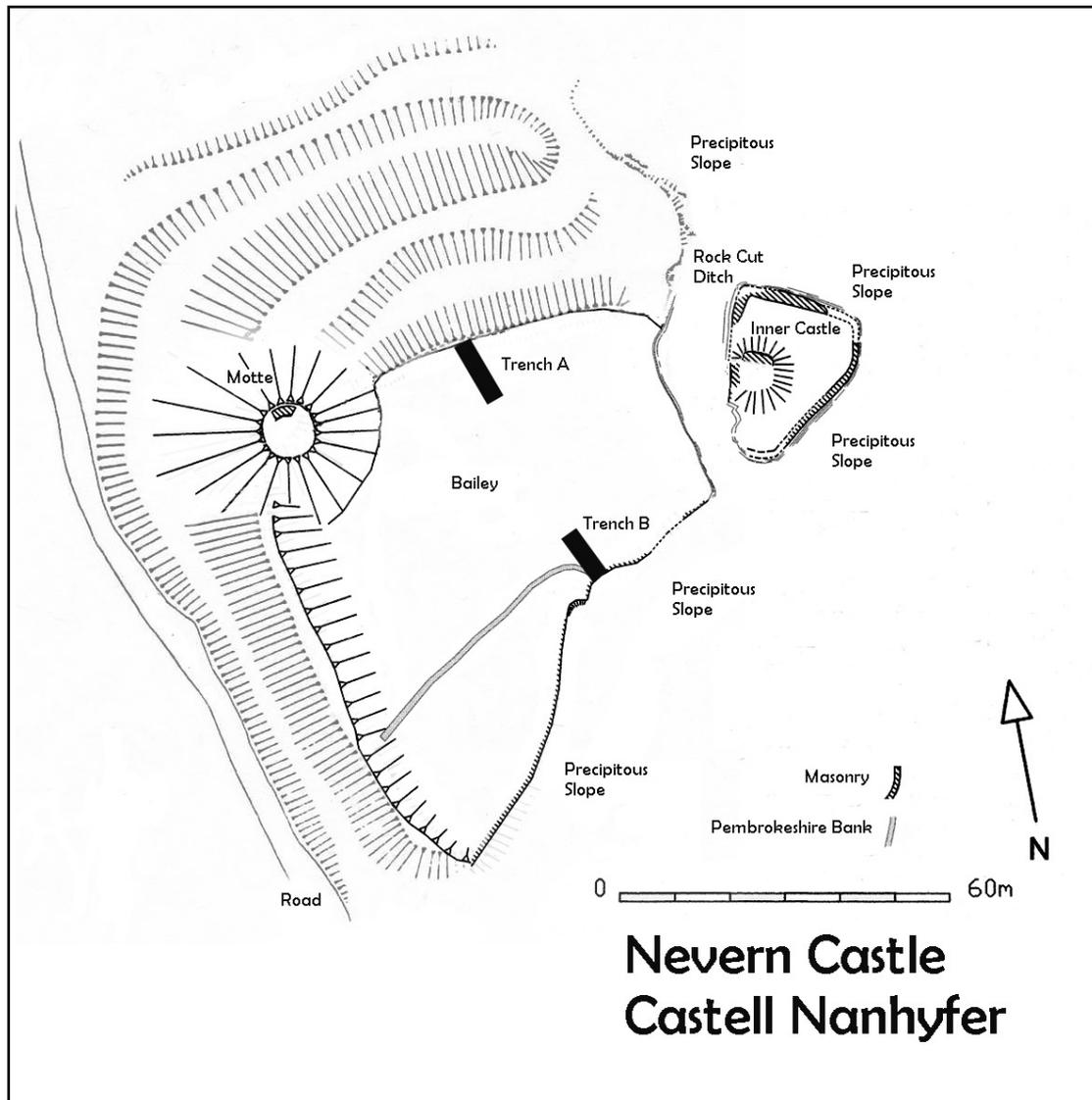
This was the first season of excavation at Nevern Castle; a two-week excavation (June 22nd – July 4th) directed by Dr Chris Caple with supervisor Will Davies and a team of 4 students from Durham University. This initial season followed an earlier geophysical survey of the site (Davies 2005) and was funded by the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park and the director. It was intended to assess the extent and quality of archaeological remains, including stratigraphy, present on the site.

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 or 1180'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 destroyed 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 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 are 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, such as Dolwyddelan and Dolbadarn built by the princes of Gwynedd, started with the Lord Rhys in Deheubarth (West Wales). As yet none of the masonry castles, which he may have built either in part or whole, has ever been excavated. Existing archaeological work has already suggested that few, if any, traces of 12<sup>th</sup> century work remain at the Lord Rhys's principal castles of Dinefwr or Cardigan, since they suffered from extensive later building work. If, as history suggests, Nevern was abandoned in 1195 the remains of one of Lord Rhys's 12<sup>th</sup> century masonry castles may be preserved as well as the associated material culture of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, which is so rare in the rest of Wales. Beneath the late 12<sup>th</sup> century masonry castle may also be the earlier original

earth and timber Norman castle of the early 12<sup>th</sup> century and beneath that the remains of a Welsh llys of the 11th century.

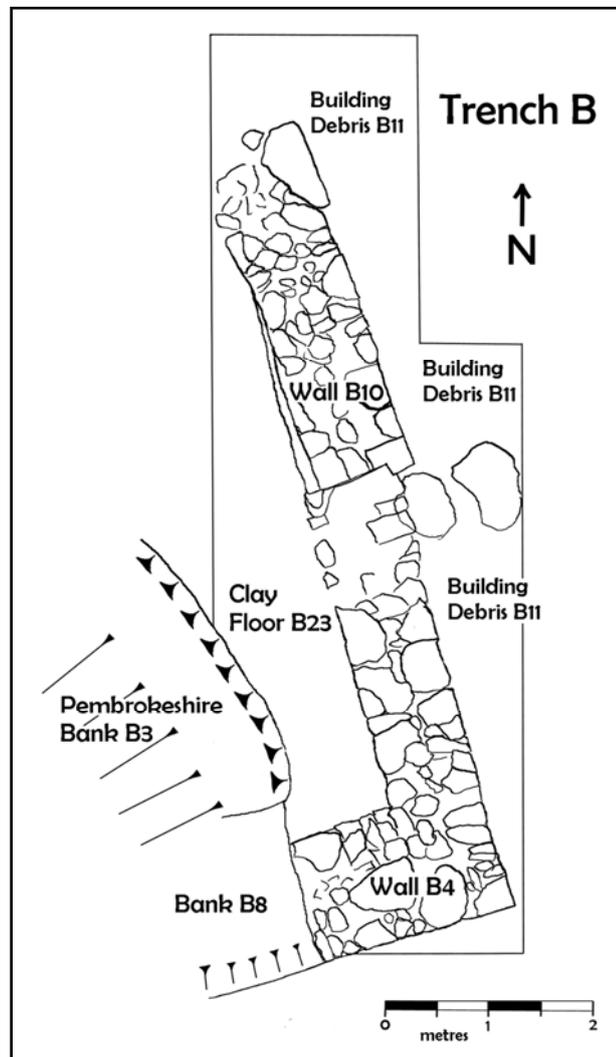
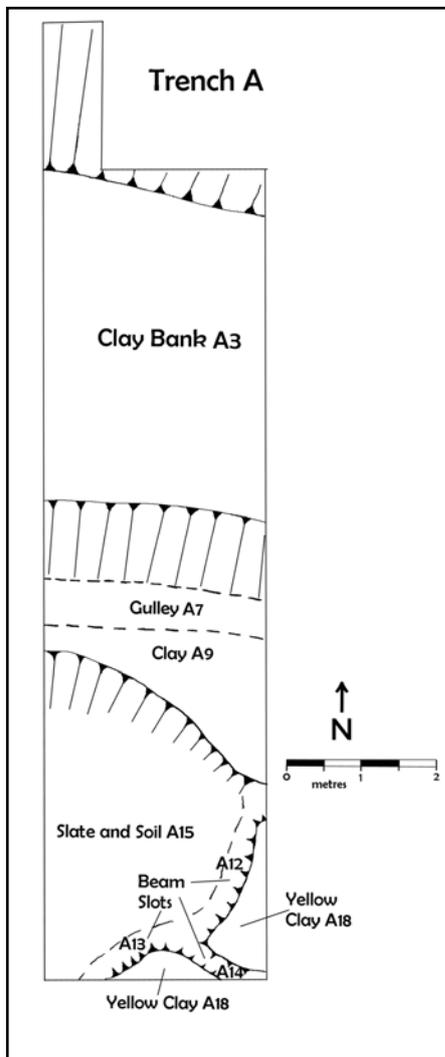
In this initial season two trenches were opened up. They were positioned to locate the outer defences on the north and south side of the site and any traces of buildings immediately behind the defences. These locations, protected by the defences, also represent the places where the sequence of stratified archaeological remains would be best preserved.



**Trench A** – 11 x 3 m on the north inner rampart of the site.

Excavation revealed a bank of orange clay (A3), which formed the inner north rampart to the bailey of the castle. Much of the upper part of this bank had been lost, probably through agricultural activity (faint plough marks on the bank), to form over a metre of soil which covered the bailey behind the rampart. The loss of the top part of the bank had removed all trace of any masonry wall or wooden palisade that may originally have been present on top of the bank. Ceramics in the plough soil indicated a long period of agricultural use of the site through the late and post medieval period. Beneath the agricultural soil was an occupation layer producing ceramics and other debris, beneath which were tantalising traces of beam slots from wooden buildings

(A12, A13, A14) cut into a yellow clay soil (A18), which overlay a substantial levelling layer of shattered slate and saturated soil (A15). Further areas of the bailey will need to be cleared in order to reveal the extent and nature of these wooden buildings. A gully (A7) behind the clay bank, may have channelled water away from the wooden buildings. The ceramics obtained from the occupation earth and beam slots were consistently late 12<sup>th</sup> century domestic wares.



**Trench B – 9 x 3m on the south edge of the bailey.**

Excavation revealed the latest feature was a Pembrokebank (B3), probably of 18th or 19th century origin, which had a vertical slate facing on its north-east side. This butted onto the eroded remains of an earth and stone bank (B8) along the southern edge of the site of unknown date. Beneath this bank was a substantial clay-bonded, split-slate wall (B4), which ran along the edge of the southern slope of the site and formed the southern side of a building. The eastern wall of the building was also unearthed (B10), and this contained a doorway, one side of which remained three courses of clay-bonded standing masonry. This doorway was formed of beautifully squared blocks of sandstone.

The building, whose size is unknown since excavation has not yet revealed its north or west wall, was deliberately demolished; much of the clay and building stone lying in an

open area to the east of the building (B11). Inside the building, above the clay floor (B23), was an occupation layer containing numerous 12th century pot sherds. Lying face down in this layer was a gaming board; a piece of slate, with the design for Nine Men's Morris roughly scribed into its surface. One circular slate gaming counter was also recovered from this area. In the doorway to the building the articulated leg of a horse was recovered and there was also evidence of burning. It appeared that this building had, after a period of occupation, been hastily abandoned, leaving the broken board and counter behind. Dead animals appear to have been left in situ and buildings collapsed or pulled down on top of them, leaving valuable building stone buried in the rubble. Leaving valuable building stone behind meant that this abandonment was not for economic reasons, but for military ones, and thus may correspond with the slighting of the site by Hywel Sais in 1195. However, this must remain a tentative suggestion at present, given the limited extent of excavation and the perils of seeking to match archaeological evidence and historical records.

This season's excavations have clearly demonstrated the potential of the site; it has substantial remaining stratigraphy, evidence of the material culture of its Welsh occupants of the late 12th century and evidence of several phases of wooden and masonry internal buildings within the bailey from the 12th century. The expensively squared masonry in the doorway is typical of an Anglo-Norman building tradition which, if it were found in Glamorgan or Somerset, would be in a mortared wall. Clay bonded walls are more typical of earlier periods and stone construction in West Wales – though lacking any comparative Welsh buildings of the 12<sup>th</sup> century it is impossible to say this technique has any specific cultural associations. Evidence of a fusion of building techniques / traditions appears to be present in the castle.

**Nine Men's Morris Board** – slate gaming board (360 x 360mm) in 2 pieces.

This board appears to have been dropped on the floor of the building, possibly when the inhabitants were leaving the building ahead of its destruction, was formed of the natural slate present on the site. It had been deliberately split to expose one of the natural pale grey layers within the slate. The design, probably scribed with a knife or similar sharp tool, appears to have attempted to cut through the grey surface layer to the darker slate layer beneath, as the maker sought to make the board design clearer. The game of Nine Men's Morris, is part of a family of games known as mills or merels, and evolved from the simpler earlier forms of the game, Six and Three Men's Morris. All required the players to place counters on the corners or intersections of lines (nine in this case) and subsequently move the counters in an attempt to form lines of 3 counters (mills). These games are thus similar to the game of noughts and crosses (Parlett 1999).

Three Men's Morris was played throughout much of the ancient world, from the Roman Empire to Ancient China, as evidenced by boards scratched on ancient buildings. However, Parlett (1999, 117) suggests that Three Men's Morris, 'was not known in Britain prior before the Norman conquest'. It subsequently became very popular, being scribed on walls and seats of cloisters of many 13th and 14th century English cathedrals. The more complex forms of Six and Nine Men's Morris also became popular reaching its zenith in the 14th century (Bell 1960, 94) and is still played today. A fragment of a wooden board retrieved from the late 9th century Viking ship burial at Gokstad, had one side marked out for Nine Men's Morris. Other examples have come from other Viking and medieval sites, including Whitby Abbey. The discovery of this Nine Men's Morris board at Nevern Castle, together with tablemen found at Loughor Castle (Redknap 1994) and chessmen at Dryslwyn castle and other sites

(O'Connor et. al. 2007) indicates that board games were frequently played in the castles of 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century Wales.



Future seasons of excavation, funding permitting, plan to uncover the complex sequence of bank, ditch and motte defences which form this monument. We will also seek to reveal the extent and nature of the internal buildings within the bailey of the castle, and uncover the material culture of the inhabitants of a Welsh 12<sup>th</sup> century castle.

Dr Chris Caple  
25/7/2008

## Bibliography

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