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NEVERN CASTLE: SEARCHING FOR THE FIRST MASONRY CASTEL IN WALES

Chris Caple

Introduction

An initial survey of Nevern Castle - Castell Nanhyfer together with observations on the history and visible archaeological features on the site was published by King and Perks in *Archaeologia Cambrensis* in 1950-51. The site has subsequently been protected through scheduled ancient monument status and through purchase by the Nevern Community Council in the early 1980s. The desire to research and develop the site led to the recent establishment of a partnership between the Nevern Community Council, the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park and Durham University Department of Archaeology. This partnership, led by Phil Bennett and Chris Caple, secured SCIF funding from the Welsh Assembly, administered through Cadw, in 2009, which has helped fund, conserve and develop the site for visitors. Following an initial geophysical survey, there have been four seasons of excavation. Information on the initial excavations has been published (Caple 2009; Caple and Davies 2008) and is available from the websites: <http://www.dur.ac.uk/archaeology/research/projects/?mode=project&id=405>; www.neverncastle.com; www.cambria.org.uk/nevern/neverndigdiary.html While a substantial report on the initial four seasons of excavation is currently in preparation for *Archaeologia Cambrensis*, this paper flags the key results from the 2009-10 seasons.

Historical Background and Context

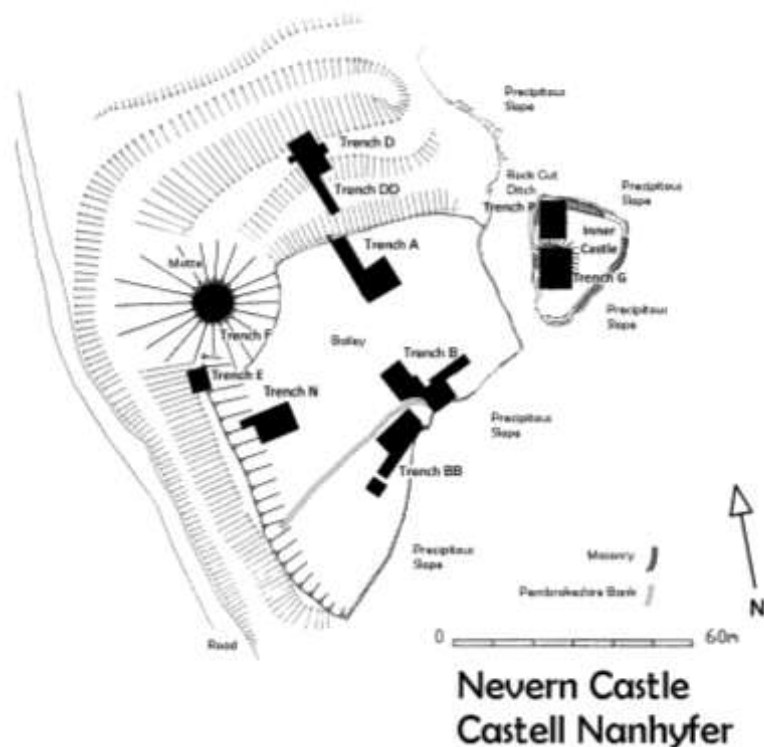
Historical records suggest that the castle was the 11th-century *llys* of the local Welsh prince (*tywysog*), Cuhelyn, prior to its capture by Robert FitzMartin during the Norman conquest of Pembrokeshire in AD 1108-10. FitzMartin created Nevern as the caput for his barony of Cemais, formed from the Welsh cantref of the same name, and the large motte on this site is almost certainly part of the castle he established. The bailey was also probably part of his castle, though it may have additionally protected the borough of 18 burgage plots which he established (Miles 1998, 26).

After the Anglo-Norman defeat by Welsh forces at Crug Mawr (1136) it is uncertain who controlled north Pembrokeshire. There are no documents issued by FitzMartin from Nevern in this period and where there is reference to conflict in the *Brut-y-Tywysogyon*, e.g. Wiston in 1147, it is normally in south Pembrokeshire or Carmarthenshire. From 1156 the principal Welsh leader in West Wales was the Rhys ap Gruffudd (the Lord Rhys), and while the *Brut-y-Tywysogyon* suggests that he returned conquered lands (which could include Nevern) to Anglo-Norman control in 1158, he recaptured these Anglo-Norman landholdings in 1165. It appears likely that he held Nevern in the 1160s since William FitzMartin, Robert's son, married Angharad, the Lord Rhys' daughter, in the 1170s, presumably to regain control of Cemais. This marriage was probably arranged in 1171 when the Lord Rhys reached agreement with Henry II by which he was allowed to retain his ancestral lands of Deheubarth, but returned other lands to their Norman lords, and became the king's Justiciar in West Wales.

In March 1188 Giraldus Cambrensis and Archbishop Baldwin passed through this area raising men for the forthcoming crusade. Archbishop Baldwin probably spent the night of Monday March 28th at Nevern (Llanhyver) castle, before he and Giraldus went on, via St Dogmael's Abbey to meet the Lord Rhys on the bridge over the river Teifi (Thorpe 1978, 34). Since they would normally meet a lord at the start of his lands and he would accompany them through his estate, this should indicate that William FitzMartin controlled Cemais at this date. In 1191 the Lord Rhys captured Nevern Castle from his son-in-law – an act almost certainly precipitated by the departure of William FitzMartin on crusade with King Richard (Bruce-Copplestone Crow, pers comm). Such actions would explain the fury of Giraldus Cambrensis at the Lord Rhys, who had sworn '*a whole series of oaths, which he had sworn in person on the most precious of relics to the effect that William should be left in all peace and security in his castle*' (trans by Thorpe 1978, 171). Control of the castle then swapped back and forth between the Lord Rhys and three of his sons (Gruffudd, Maelgwyn and Hywel Sais), though for a period in 1194 the Lord Rhys was held prisoner in Nevern castle by his sons. Lord Rhys was subsequently released when Hywel Sais took the castle, but he died in 1197 and by 1204 Anglo-Norman forces had recaptured north Pembrokeshire, including Nevern. The *Annales Cambriae* record that in 1195 Hywel Sais deliberately destroyed Nevern Castle (Remfry 2007, 99) to prevent it falling into Anglo-Norman hands (Turvey 1997;

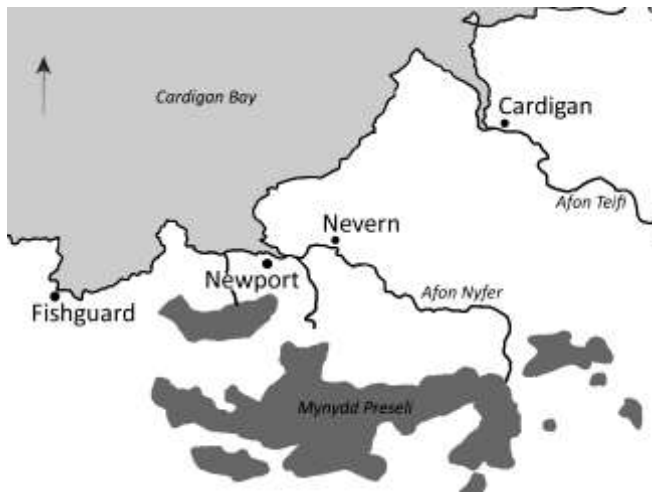
King and Perks 1950/51); Nevern Castle does not appear in any written records after this date; most probably, a new castle and borough were instead established in Newport circa 1204 (Murphy 1994).

Interestingly, the Lord Rhys is the first Welsh prince recorded as building with stone and mortar. He did so at his castle of Cardigan in 1171, though the extent and nature of this construction are unknown. As the dominant Welsh leader in South Wales from 1156 to 1197, 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 him in Deheubarth (W Wales). To date, none of his masonry castles has ever been excavated, and archaeological work suggests that few, if any, traces of 12th-century work remain at the Lord Rhys's principal castles of Dinefwr or Cardigan – both suffering extensive later building work. Effectively, Nevern, destroyed in 1195, might well provide the first physical remains associated with the life of the Lord Rhys.



Location and Setting

Nevern Castle is an earthwork with traces of masonry walls and deep rock cut ditches, on a spur formed by the gorge of the stream, the Gamman, on the north side of the valley of the river Nyfer. It overlooks the church of St Brynach and its associated churchyard, containing several early Christian inscribed stones. Once the centre of the cantref and medieval lordship of Cemais, it lies less than 2 miles west of the present day town and later lordship caput of Newport, in north Pembrokeshire. The site comprises a large ditched and ramparted enclosure or Bailey, its massive defences cutting off the end of the spur in a manner reminiscent of an Iron Age or Early Medieval promontory fort. The defences are doubled on the north side, from which it is now approached, the inner rampart being lower here than to the west. Overlying the north-western angle of the ramparts is a substantial 8m high motte. The south and east sides are defended by precipitous slopes plunging down to Afon Gamman. A substantial rock cut ditch (6-8m wide and deep) cuts off the eastern tip of the site, this 'Inner Castle' has remnants of earth or clay bonded slate wall present on all sides. The looks out over the valley of the river Nefyr and faces Mynydd Preseli to the south; the original road from St Davids to Cardigan crosses the Nefyr just below the castle.



Excavations

To date, no evidence of any prehistoric or early medieval activity has been recovered at Nevern Castle. A cross section through the outer northern bank (Trench D) indicates that this bank was built on top of early 12th-century occupation debris. Thus all the visible and excavated features of the castle are of 12th-century date. Two major phases of activity have been identified:

Early 12th century (site phase 4)

In the early 12th century, an earth and timber castle was established, with the construction of the motte and adjoining banks and ditches on the north and west sides cutting off this promontory overlooking the river valley. The banks were formed from the natural clay and slate/shale bedrock, recovered during excavation of the ditches. On the south edge of the site traces of a smaller, shallower bank and ditch (Trench BB) have been uncovered beneath later 12th-century buildings. On top of the motte (Trench F) evidence for a large four-post structure, a watch-tower probably similar to that on the motte at Abinger, has been recovered. Behind the northern bank (Trench A) traces of wooden buildings have been recovered – initially a post-built structure, subsequently a beam-based structure was erected. These building traces were overlain by late 12th-century occupation debris. On the south side of the site (Trench B) a number of stake holes indicated activity of unclear character. On the west (Trench N), the slate of the west bank had slumped into the interior of the site and became compacted through use; a pit had been cut down through the slate, presumably to recover clay subsoil. Similar pits were unearthed in Trenches A and B. A series of shallow post holes cut down through the compacted slate surfaces behind the western rampart signify at least one wooden framed building. In the area between the inner and outer north banks (Trench DD), a sunken roadway was uncovered; this probably formed the main access into the castle in this period and required visitors to walk around the east end of the outer north bank, and then up between the banks to enter the castle through a gateway between the motte and the inner north bank. On the top of the outer north bank (Trench D) post and stake holes for a series of wooden palisades was uncovered. In the east (Trench P), a shallow bank and ditch may have cut off part of the site from the rest of the castle, forming an Inner Castle. All these features appear to be part of the earth and timber castle of William FitzMartin created between 1108 and 1136. Thus far there have been few finds from this phase.

Early to Mid-12th century (site phase 5)

The silting up of the roadway between the north banks suggests a period of decline or even abandonment of the castle after this initial phase of occupation.

Mid- to Late 12th century (site phases 6 & 7)

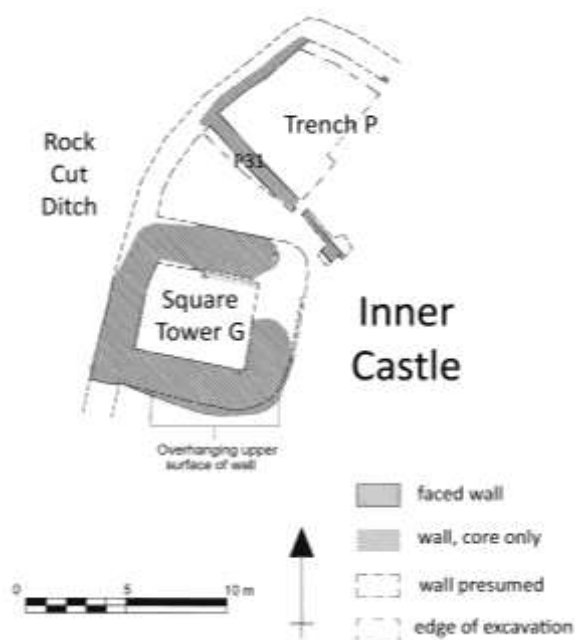
Subsequently, however, there was a substantial rebuilding of the castle in stone, using local slate mortared together with the local clay subsoil; no lime mortar was evident. On top of the motte (Trench F) the wooden watch-tower was demolished, the post holes filled in, and a 9m diameter round tower with straight sides was constructed. The tower was at least 2 storeys high with a first floor entrance since there

was no ground floor entrance. Evidence for an internal wooden floor, sound and fireproofed with a clay covering similar to that found at Dryslwyn (Caple 2007, 155), was recovered.

Following a period of occupation, the round tower, along with the rest of the castle, was destroyed. On the top of the outer north bank (Trench D), some evidence for stone walling, perhaps a thin stone wall protecting the outside of the wooden palisade, is starting to emerge, but wooden defences probably still persisted alongside stone towers in the late 12th century in this area at least. On the eastern side (Trenches P and G), a substantial rock-cut ditch replaced the shallow, earlier one, creating much stronger defences for the Inner Castle, which was also given a curtain wall and a substantial square tower overlooking the ditch. Unusually the south-east corner of this tower was given a rounded corner, probably because this would be a stronger construction form when working in slate seated in clay. No other 12th-century Anglo-Norman ‘square’ tower with one or more rounded corners is known. The tower was constructed on a platform (wall P31); beyond lay an open courtyard (Trench P). The location of the wooden bridge over the rock-cut ditch giving access to the Inner Castle is yet to be determined.

On the south side of the castle, overlooking the steep slope down to the valley and overlying the earlier defences, a series of substantial stone buildings were constructed. To date at least three ‘south range’ buildings have been partially uncovered. The central one (SRB1) at 22 x 8m appears to be a large hall, whose entrance in the eastern side (doorcase and doorway) was composed of accurately squared gritstone blocks, secured with clay subsoil. Similar construction occurs in the western entrance of the SRB2 (10 x 6.5m) where the doorcase and the slate walling were formed in a single construction phase. This building is tentatively described as a solar. The stonecutting work is undoubtedly associated with Anglo-Norman craftsmen. Since the slate-and-clay wall building is a traditional Welsh construction form, used into the 19th century, these buildings seem to show a fusion of Anglo-Norman and Welsh building traditions. There is evidence of phases of rebuilding and occupation at the eastern end of the hall (SRB2).

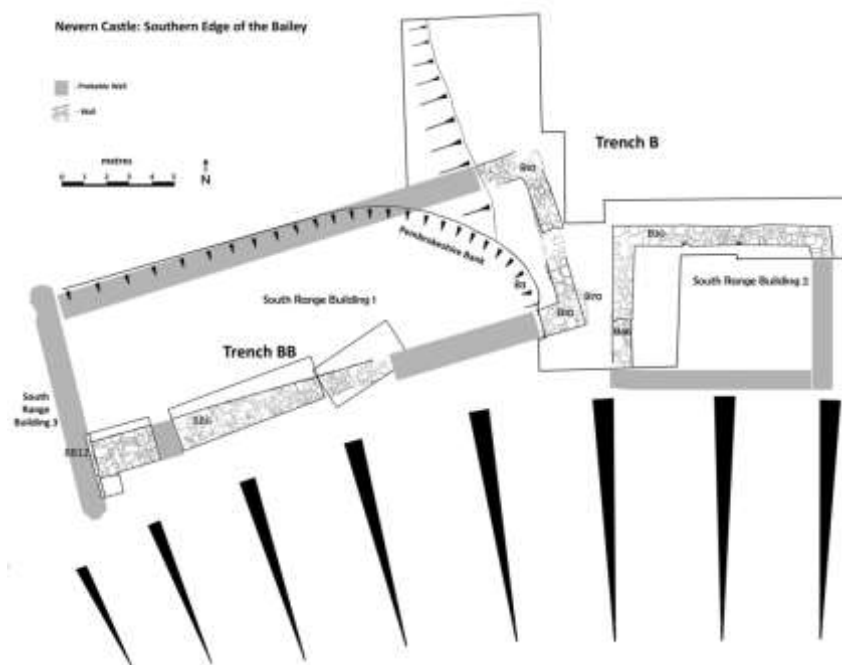
At the west end of the site (Trench N), fragmentary remains of slate surfaces, badly damaged by later ploughing were found on top of 12th-century occupation earth which overlay the earlier building traces. Finds suggest domestic, craft or industrial activity occurred in this area but it was not possible to reconstruct any building forms. The entrance into the late 12th-century castle has yet to be uncovered.



There was considerable evidence of destruction of this castle, with burning present in the round tower, square tower and the south range buildings: this should equate to the historically attested destruction of the castle by Hywel Sais in 1195. Most of the finds (including two Nine Men’s Morris boards, scratched onto pieces of slate, together with some slate counters) come from this destruction phase; such remains give the impression of a hastily abandoned castle.

Post-12th century (site phases 8 & 9)

Subsequent agricultural activity saw ploughing cutting through and removing the archaeological layers from the centre of the site, only leaving intact archaeology on the north and south sides of the site; a slate drain was also cut into the ditch between the north banks.



Discussion

The complete rebuilding of the castle in Phase 6 would have taken a considerable amount of time and money, but it significantly increased the defensive capabilities of the castle and the stone buildings at the top of the southern slope were deliberately sited to make them visible to all those travelling up the valley from St David's to Cardigan, so displaying the power and wealth of the lord of Cemais. As Robert FitzMartin probably died, in his 80s, in the late 1150s it seems unlikely that he involved himself in a substantial castle building project at this time; his son William was still very young, probably a ward of Henry II, and thus also not in a position to do so. From 1165 the Lord Rhys appears again in control of the area and it is possible he constructed this castle on a site now in his ownership. The most likely period of construction is the early 1170s when, as noted, William FitzMartin married the Lord Rhys' daughter. Following this settlement the Lord Rhys' building works in stone at Cardigan Castle indicate a period of stability. 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 – potentially through rebuilding the castle of Nevern in stone, thereby creating a major landmark on a territory which his father had initially conquered 60 years earlier.

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