

VOLUME II

**EARTHWORK CASTLES OF GWENT AND ERGYNG AD 1050 –
1250**

EXCAVATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

Excavation of specific sites would provide valuable data for both this research and castle studies in general. Key potential sites pinpointed were Castell Arnallt, Bryngwyn, Dingestow (Mill Hill), Dorstone, Gypsy Tump, Llangiby (Bowling Green), Llanvaches, Nant-y-bar, Newcastle, Newton Tump, Old Castleton, Penyclawdd, Pont Hendre, Poston, Trelech and Wolvesnewton. The full excavation programme was far beyond the scope of this study but the list remains a useful guide to priority sites for future excavation. Practical constraints limited excavations undertaken to two, Penyclawdd and Trelech.

PENYCLAWDD 2002

Design brief:

The initial design brief for the excavation at Penyclawdd was a single trench 8m by 3m located on the lawn of Penyclawdd Court, adjacent to the earthwork mound but outside of the scheduled area (Vol. 2. figure E.1). The objective of the excavation was to determine the existence of a ditch to the south of the motte, which if present, would show that the mound originally had a complete surrounding ditch as shown on the 1775 estate plan, (D.591.32A.37) (see Vol. 2. figure 97). It was also hoped that the predicted ditch would yield dating evidence for the site; prior to excavation the earliest date for Penyclawdd, Castle Mound, was 1349 (see Vol. 1. page 296). The plan shows the location of the 2002 trench on the right of the mound.

Results:

The results confirmed the presence of a ditch which was revealed as a cut slope in natural clay roughly consistent with the predicted southern rim (Vol. 2. figure E.2). The plan shows the edge of the trench and both the west and northern trench sections. The edge of the ditch shows up in the bottom of the photograph and can be easily identified as the red clay area in the foreground (Vol. 2. plate E.1). The change in context can be seen on the west side of the trench (far side of the photograph) as a stark colour change marked by a layer of tumble. The ditch reached a depth of 1.47m within the confines of the excavated area and was seen to continue downwards towards the earthwork.

Finds:

The finds in the fill of the ditch were mostly 18th to 20th century pottery, metalwork and glass

consistent with a cottage that used to occupy the area. An interesting layer towards the bottom of the excavation consisted of a tumble of rubble and flat stones that appeared to be loosely stacked and oriented away from the mound. No artefactual dating evidence other than that mentioned above was found in context (Phillips 2002. 130-31).

PENYCLAWDD 2003

Design brief:

As a result of the 2002 excavation, scheduled monument consent enabling excavation was granted to try to locate the bottom of the ditch and search for dating evidence. Consent was also granted for an evaluation trench on top of the mound to examine the high resistance features that were revealed during the geophysical survey (Vol. 2. figure E.1). Both the 2003 trenches are shown giving the alignment of the 2002 trench as well as the geophysical results (see Vol. 2 geophysics). The first trench, 5m by 3m was excavated at the south of the mound as an extension to the 2002 excavation, thereby producing a good section through the ditch. A gap of around two metres had to be left between the two trenches because of a boundary hedge. The second trench was located to the north of the mound top at a point where a high resistivity reading had suggested a linear feature.

Results:

The result of the excavation was that the inner edge of the ditch was found as a continuous slope of the mound which had been cut into the natural bedrock, thus confirming the construction of the mound. The ditch continued to slope downwards to a depth of 2.67m beneath the present surface at the time of the excavation, at which point it started to rise, probably towards the level recorded in 2002. The photograph of the ditch close to the end of the excavation gives a good idea of the depth that was finally reached (Vol. 2. plate E.2). The motte is in the foreground and the maximum depth is just behind the person excavating. The present motte stands at a low height of 1.89m at this point, however, the combined depth of the ditch and the height of the motte, 4.56m would tend to make the overall structure more impressive.

Finds:

The fill of the ditch showed phases of levelling, all of which overlay a collapse layer of large stone roof tiles, context 022, (Vol. 2. figure E.3). Initial pottery analysis places the collapse layer in the late Tudor period (Anthony *pers comm.*).

The second trench, 3m by 3m, was opened in an area highlighted by the resistivity survey which produced results that were interpreted as masonry walls (see Vol. 2. geophysics). The fill of the trench contained areas of burning and collapse debris such as roof tile and the photograph shows some of the burnt area to the left of the smaller wall (Vol. 2. plate E.3). As can be seen in the photograph, the anticipated walls were found just under the surface. One main wall running east-west measured 1.8m thick and survives to a depth of 0.6m (Vol. 2. figure E.3). The second wall, only 0.5 m thick, butts onto the larger and is obviously a later build. The photomontage shows the length of exposed main wall with the smaller wall to the right (Vol. 2. plate E.4). It can be seen from the photograph that there was a difference in the build of the second wall. Apart from the width, the smaller wall has much better facing. Initial pottery analysis from this trench again suggests late Tudor.

Interpretation:

The evidence suggests that the motte has at some time in the past supported a large, rectangular masonry structure which suffered fire damage. Whether the structure was razed to the ground in that fire or salvaged for the possible building of the present house is not known.

TRELECH 2002

Design brief:

During the topographical survey of the site at Trelech a large rectangular depression feature was observed at the top of the raised bank to the north of the motte (Vol. 2. plate 251). The depression feature was dismissed as a possible tree-throw due to the regularity of its shape. On close examination of the area, and with later reference to measured data from the topographical survey (Vol. 2. surveys), however, it was possible to identify a similar depression on the north edge of the motte, quite close to the top (Vol. 2. plate 252). At this point the possible significance of the two areas as the remains of a bridge base, suggested the need for further investigation, which resulted in a geophysical survey (Vol. 2. geophysics). The results of the resistivity survey revealed a high resistivity anomaly in the area of the bank, identified above.

Results:

On the basis of the surveys, scheduled monument consent to excavate was obtained and excavation started in 2002 with a single 10m by 3m trench orientated north/south at 90° to the

edge of the motte (Vol. 2. figure E.4). The plan shows the layout of the 2002 trench (TR1) with the motte base to the right. The initial aims for the excavation were to ascertain the nature and function of the depression feature in the top of the bank (Vol. 2. plate 252). As the feature was suspected to be a bridge base, then not only could there be further associated features along its path, but there was also a likelihood that finds dropped from such a structure could lie in the ditch below. It was therefore decided to put a trench across the whole length of the ditch and bank which would have an added bonus of being able to provide a complete section of the ditch (Vol. 2. plate E5).

A great deal of information was gained from the excavation as regards the first objective, the bridge base. A large rock cut beam slot was revealed across the bank showing the position of what was interpreted as an upper trestle. A second beam slot was found, just at the edge of excavation, at the top of the bailey bank, which may have been a further trestle. A small offset post-hole was also discovered in the bank west of the upper trestle slot. The angle of the post-hole suggests that a support pole may have been set there, either to brace the bridge or possibly to support the walk-way. At the bottom of the bank, an area of the bedrock had been flattened off which may have supported another post.

The bank itself had been sculpted into two distinct tiers around the area excavated and measurements taken from each side of the trench showed that the effect was indeed localised (Vol. 2. figure E.5 : plate E. 5). The section drawing shows the layout of the trench in relation to the motte, with included profiles of the natural land gradients east, ab and west, cd, of the trench. The trench profile shows the measured bedrock layer in section against the background, cd, to give an idea of the modification that had been done to accommodate the bridge structure.

An interpretation was made that the bridge would have been supported from at least two beams set into rock cut ditches. A third support would have existed towards the bottom of the ditch on either posts or another beam and there may have been further support within the ditch.

Finds:

The end of the rock cut slot yielded the articulated hind quarters of a horse that appeared to have been deposited in the cut. The rest of the horse appeared to lay to the west. At the bottom of the ditch in the south-east corner, a piece of wood was found and this was collected for radiocarbon dating. The wood a piece of oak, returned a date of 864±34 BP which works out to 1138 ±34 (University of Waikato, New Zealand). The pottery finds are awaiting analysis.

Other information derived from the excavation showed that the ditch had actually been cut into

the bedrock which also indicated that some 3m of the motte was partially natural, with only the top section added. Also important was the establishment of the bailey's position to the north of the motte rather than as previously suggested to the south.

TRELECH 2003

Design brief:

The 2002 results posed questions such as how big was the bridge, and still to be addressed, how old was the motte? In an attempt to answer these questions scheduled monument consent was granted for a second season of excavation.

Results:

In 2003 four trenches were excavated; three located as east/west extensions of the 2002 trench and the fourth north/south across the ditch, 1m west of the 2003 trench (Vol. 2. figure E.6 : plate E.6). The trench atop the bailey revealed a possible foundation for a bridge support but the evidence was inconclusive. The second trench, placed on the line of the beam-slot from the 2002 excavation, revealed a rock cut slot measuring, 3.9m long by 1m wide (plate E.7 and E.8). The depth of the slot at the back was 0.8m and at the front varying from 0.2m-0.6m. The remaining skeleton of the horse, discovered in the previous year was also recovered from the beam slot. A small musket ball fell from the skull as it was being excavated and there was a hole at the front of the skull, presumably where it had been shot. Whether the horse fell in the hole and was dispatched or whether the horse's body was dumped is not known. The third trench at the bottom edge of the ditch bank revealed the natural bedrock which had been cut to form the ditch. The fourth trench in the bottom of the ditch revealed more of the rock cut ditch and a curious raised boss of green sandstone that may have been natural, but arguably may have been purposely left in place. If the latter interpretation is correct then the boss may have had something to do with the bridge support.

The drawings at present have not been completed.

Finds:

Dating evidence was provided by seventeen sherds of pot, one small piece of oak and a silver half-cross penny from the reign of Edward I, c. 1275 (Besley, *pers comm*). The coin was found at the top of the bailey bank, about 0.5m beneath the surface.

The pot assemblage which was derived from the ditch included

one sherd of Bristol Redcliff 13th century,
two sherds of Monnow Valley ware mid 13th century,
one sherd of A5 mid thirteenth century
thirteen sherds of A3 hand-made late 12th century

(Clark *pers comm.*, Antony *pers. Comm.*).

Interpretation:

The second season of excavation clearly revealed that the depression on the bank of the bailey was indeed caused by a large sub-surface feature. The feature, as suggested in the first excavation, was a rock cut slot to take a trestle which would have supported a bridge. The conclusion has led to the reassessment of the bailey at Trelech with possible reason to believe that the motte and bailey were quite extensive.

Dating evidence from the excavation has pushed back the period of use at the motte from 1231 (see Vol. 1. page 332) to the late 12th century.



Phillips 2002



Phillips 2003



Phillips 2003



Phillips 2003



Phillips 2002



Phillips 2003



Phillips 2003



Phillips 2003