

Penyard Castle, Herefordshire

A report on a site visit



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Herefordshire Archaeology
Environment, Planning and Waste
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Penyard Castle, Herefordshire

A report on a site visit

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Herefordshire Archaeology is Herefordshire Council's county archaeology service. It advises upon the conservation of archaeological and historic landscapes, maintains the county Sites and Monument Record, and carries out conservation and investigative field projects. The County Archaeologist is Dr. Keith Ray.

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Introduction

Penyard Castle is a Scheduled Ancient Monument (HE 126; UDS 1005385) located in southern Herefordshire above Weston-under-Penyard, near Ross on Wye (NGR SO 618226). Two upstanding structures remain visible: a section of masonry identified as a probable tower and the nearby shell of a house, which appears to be of 14th-century and later date, standing just within a wood in the ownership of the Forestry Commission. This report is solely concerned with the latter structure. This was a Listed Grade II building from 1973 (Ross Rural 5/47) and no record has so far been found of its revocation.

This document is the outcome of discussions between Dr Neil Rimmington (formerly of Herefordshire Archaeology) and the site owners, the Forestry Commission, leading to a method statement for the Archaeological assessment and recording of Penyard Castle (house), by Tim Hoverd of HA (dated 7th October 2013). The house was also the subject of a 2011 Project Brief by Sarah Lewis of English Heritage for (in summary) clearance of vegetation; survey, recording and analysis; stabilisation; and repair and future management.

Although the October 2013 method statement and 2011 project brief both specify measured survey, an initial site visit on 5th December 2013 by the writer and David Williams MIFA, immediately showed that this is not now practicable, in that only a small proportion of the building is clear of thick vegetation, and much of it is inaccessible for the same reason. Furthermore, some visible parts of the building are in unsound condition and it was felt that removal of (for example) ivy and fallen timber should not be undertaken until provision was made for stabilisation and emergency repairs.

The following report therefore takes the form of an historic building assessment: a brief statement of the present condition of the structure together with some account of what can, in its present state, be understood of its significance. The report concludes with recommendations for further work.

In brief summary, it is felt that the significance of this complex structure, elements of which appear to be of 14th-century date, has been under-rated, and urgent recommendations are made for limited immediate stabilisation if loss of fabric and loss of significance is to be avoided. Recommendations are also made for clearance of vegetation to allow the condition of the remainder of the building to be assessed.

Previous work

The most significant previous investigation was undertaken in 1994 by Martin Cook of the then Hereford & Worcester County Council Archaeological Service (Cook 1994). This included a measured survey plan and a fabric analysis of the standing structural elements, together with a summary of previous research, by George Marshall in the 1920s, the Royal Commission in the 1930s, and Paul Remfry at a later (unknown – 1980s?) date. These will not be reiterated in the present context and readers are referred to the 1994 report for a fuller account.

Those elements of the building that could be seen are described below; when the building was analysed by HWCC in 1994 (when far more of it was visible) individual components (e.g. wall sections, fireplaces, cupboards) were given 'component numbers' and these are referred to below in brackets.

Description

General

The structure is a ruined house in extremely poor overall condition. It consists of a main block aligned north-south with gables at each end and a ruined, lower, extension to the east forming an overall L-plan. It stands to the south-east of the surviving castle masonry and its surrounding earthworks, in different ownership, within woodland. There are breaks-in-slope down to the east and (sharply) down to the south with a substantial tumble of stone at the corner suggesting the presence of a former masonry perimeter, the structure under discussion standing in the SE corner of the overall castle site. The wooded slopes to the south shows evidence of at least one charcoal burning platform and an unidentified hole, possibly a well or mineshaft. The structure is ringed by veteran yews on its north and east sides.

Exterior: north gable

This stands almost to its apex, which has a heavy covering of ivy. The wall itself (1994 component 23) is coursed squared sandstone rubble laid in thin (10-20cm) courses, with ugly but sound 19th- or 20th-century strip pointing in the joints. At first-floor level is a centrally-placed window of medieval character with a central mullion. Its head is now obscured but the 1994 report describes the lights as having pointed trefoiled heads dated to the 14th century (component 47). A substantial straight joint at the NE corner shows that the gable wall is a separate build to the east (long) wall, which appears to have been butted up to it and tied in with two through-stones. The joint has opened up to a width of 5-7cms suggesting movement in the structure, particularly outward movement in the centre of the long wall. One possible explanation of the structural separation of the gable wall from the side wall is that the latter was originally timber-framed between gable ends, and that the framing was gradually replaced in (re-used) masonry (see below).

Exterior: east (long) wall

The main/latest doorway is towards the north end of the wall and has a timber lintel composed of four re-used joists or similar members laid flat, side-by-side. Further south is a rectangular window opening, also with a re-used timber lintel. Further south is a projecting buttress-like block, c.1.8m wide. This could not be positively identified at the time of the 2013 visit as ivy masked the presence of a first-floor fireplace on its inner face that shows this to have been a projecting chimney (component 32). This chimney, and the wall to its north, are mostly composed of large blocks of good quality ashlar. However, inspection of a damaged area of its inner face just south of the doorway revealed a block of medieval-type window jamb, suggesting that the ashlar is re-used material, probably post-medieval work. The chimney is contemporary with the re-used ashlar of the north end of the wall but is quite distinct from, and appears to be butted to, fabric consisting of very small coursed squared sandstone blocks (component 29). Within this at the southern end of the wall is a low rectangular opening (component 30, identified as a cupboard) with a flat stone lintel, blocked from the inside, partly obscured by fallen masonry from the eastern outbuilding. No relationship between the east wall and south gable wall could be determined.

Exterior: south gable wall

This survives to its full original height with its chimney projecting from the apex. It is composed of similar flattish coursed sandstone to the north gable. On its east side are two openings. At first-floor level is a damaged opening, badly eroded in its head with stones obviously having dropped out since 1994; this is recommended (below) for immediate attention. Directly below is a square opening within a larger blocked opening c. 1.2 x 0.8m, possibly a doorway but more likely a window. The base of this feature is coincident with a horizontal offset or ledge about 1.5m above modern ground level, the base of the wall stepping out by c.0.1m (component 25). At the SW corner of the elevation is a blocked doorway (component 26) with ashlar jambs and a flat four-centred arched head of probable 15th-16th-century type, the door jambs in the same plane as the lower part of the wall. The south-west corner of the building survives to less than c.2m in height and there is no obvious relationship discernable from the present exposure between the south gable wall and the remains of the west wall. The south gable wall may however have extended further to the west. This is not now clear but would be consistent with the RCHM view that a structure containing a vaulted undercroft lies corner-to-corner to the south west. A possible octagonal pier base (component 18) adjoins the west end of the gable wall but whether or not this is in situ must be doubted.

Exterior: west (long) wall

This is now only visible at its south end where the wall fabric is of small squared blocks of similar character to the south end of the east wall opposite (component 39). This fabric incorporates a hollow curve or indentation that has been suggested as one side of a former circular staircase giving access to an undercroft below. A 14th-century doorway with chamfered jambs and a two-centred head reported by the

RCHM in the 1930s in the middle of this wall had been much reduced in height by 1994 and is now completely invisible, like the rest of the wall, behind vegetation, fallen timber and masonry. Nor is there any visible trace of an 'octagon stone chimney on the west outside wall' reported by the RCHM in the 1930s.

Exterior: the eastern outbuildings

The walls of a lower, eastern range, survive outside the east wall and stand to various heights up to c.1.5m amongst a tumble of fallen stones. The two rooms of this range, stepped down the slope, appear to have been built of solid ashlar (with no core work), almost certainly re-used from elsewhere on site.

Interior: north gable wall

The interior is only easily accessible at its north end via the doorway in the east wall: two-thirds of the interior to the south is choked with vegetation, rubble and fallen timber. The interior face of the north wall is totally obscured by vegetation, though a pair of oven doors is just visible in a projecting block built into the building's NE corner. The ovens, of brick and iron construction, are probably 19th-century; their flue is probably the brickwork visible above blocking the medieval window in the gable.

Interior: west wall

This is completely obscured by ivy, fallen trees and fallen masonry.

Interior: east wall

The internal door frame survives under the innermost timber lintel. The walling around the doorway is composed of smaller material than is visible on the outside. The facing stones have fallen away from the south of the doorway showing that some at least of the ashlar visible externally is re-used material. Walling further south, where it can be glimpsed through the ivy, is a mixture of large ashlar and brickwork. The first-floor carved stone fireplace (component 31) described as a 'very grand affair' in 1994 is now completely invisible and its presence was unsuspected by the December 2013 surveyors. It was thought to be of probably 17th-century date (Cook 1994, 7, based on a pers comm from Duncan Brown).

Interior: south gable wall

This has a central chimney stack projecting into the interior with a top section rising from a chamfered offset. The wall tops and a small fragment of coping shows the roof pitch to have been extremely steep, suggestive of a stone-clad roof perhaps but certainly consistent with a medieval date. A timber lintel to the ground-floor fireplace is visible but the opening is largely blocked by debris and vegetation. There is a further lintel built into the wall higher up as a spreader. Joist holes for the missing first floor are visible at the same level as the opening at the south-east corner; further

joist holes appear at first-floor ceiling level and a single central joist hole can probably be identified as having held a ridge piece.

Condition

The following is a provisional assessment, made by field archaeologists (not engineers) on the basis of fabric visible around, between and through dense vegetation. Readers are referred to the 1994 HWCC report and to the EH engineer's report of 24th September 2007 (C. Shapcott) to assess changes in the condition of the structure over the last five to twenty years.

The north gable wall appears to be in relatively sound condition insofar as it is visible: its top and inner face are completely obscured by ivy. The condition of the ivy-covered oven superstructure/flues on the inside of the wall is unknown.

The east long wall has (as reported above) shows signs of long-term outward movement at its north end. The projecting chimney has quoin stones missing, which endangers the corner of this part of the chimney block which has a buttressing effect on the long wall: this defect was identified by EH for propping in 2007 but this has not been undertaken. There has evidently been further damage to the inside face of this wall since the 1994 report, though the overall state of the wall cannot be quantified given the present vegetation.

The south gable wall is in critical condition in that the head of the first-floor opening has dropped out (compare with 1994 photos), leaving only three stones in depth between the top of the opening and the sloping top of the gable. This was recommended for immediate propping by acrow and spreader plate by the EH engineer in 2007, but this has not been undertaken. The failure of this area of stonework will put the SE corner of the building at risk; it will also negate the buttressing effect that this stonework currently has supporting the chimney stack (a fine, well-built feature) on its east side, imperilling that too. The condition of the masonry and its pointing, particularly the north face, is very poor.

It should also be emphasised that the building is accessible from footpaths to the immediate east and further south that appear to be well-used by pedestrians and mountain bikers. Wear patterns show fairly frequent visitor ingress to the north end of the building via the door in the east wall, and around the north gable. Instability and loose masonry in this structure needs to be considered as a public health & safety issue and not just as a loss of historical fabric.

Discussion

The structure under discussion appears to be a medieval building, almost certainly part of a larger range or complex, heavily adapted in the post-medieval period when extensive use was made of re-cycled castle masonry. It is impossible at this stage to

be certain of its evolution but the earliest identifiable elements above ground, from observed stratigraphic relationships, are probably the gable ends, and this reading of the structure is consistent with the 14th-century date proposed for the north gable and its window, which appears to be primary to the surrounding fabric. Paul Remfry (n.d.; see above) suggested that the 'house' was probably part of a much larger range disposed east to west that includes the standing, more-obviously 'castle' masonry now isolated in the field. This seems entirely possible, though not capable of proof without further investigation, specifically clearance of vegetation leading to detailed fabric recording and analysis, together with geophysical survey to assess the extent of below-ground masonry remains and thus place in context the upstanding fragments. Geophysical survey should also be able to isolate the extent of the reported undercroft to the south-west of the standing building, reported by Pevsner in 1963 to be filled with nettles and undergrowth (Cook 1994, 4).

Significance

A detailed appraisal of the significance of the building should await further analysis based on proper recording following the removal of vegetation and further investigation of the building's below-ground context. However, in very general terms, it appears to represent part of the domestic ranges of the castle, apparently a two-storey building with a heated ground floor and (given the RCHM description of a missing chimney to the west wall) quite possibly a heated first floor too. Given the rarity of surviving 14th-century chamber blocks and similar ranges in small stone castles (a monument type itself in urgent need of further investigation) it would be difficult to argue that this is not a building of considerable significance to the study of medieval Herefordshire and to the planning of smaller high-medieval castles.

Recommendations for further work

On the basis of the 2013 site visit in conjunction with previous archaeological and engineers' reporting, the following recommendations for further work may be made:

- Immediate propping of the damaged areas to the south gable wall and east wall projecting chimney
- Clearance of ivy and fallen timber with provision for instant remediation of further damage exposed by this process
- A full programme of archaeological fabric recording and analysis, contextualised by geophysical survey to examine the relationship between the house/cottage discussed here and the upstanding remains to the west. There is scope also for limited excavation to determine the extent, nature and relationship of the reported undercroft to the SW as this appears to impinge in some way on the standing structure
- A full programme of consolidation and repair, guided by the archaeological analysis and making use of the drawings generated, to safeguard the long-term viability of the monument

References

Cook, M, 1994, 'A survey of Penyard Castle, Ross Rural'. HWCC Archaeological Service, report 239

Illustrations



General view of the building from the east; the low walls in the foreground and middle distance belong to the eastern 'outbuildings' range



The north gable end wall (exterior) showing the medieval window (blocked) in the apex. Note strip pointing



The north east corner, looking south. The long east wall is moving outwards and separating from the gable end wall at the straight butt joint



The east wall (exterior) general view. Left to right: chimney, window, doorway



The east wall (exterior): the south end showing different (smaller) masonry type and cupboard-type feature bottom left



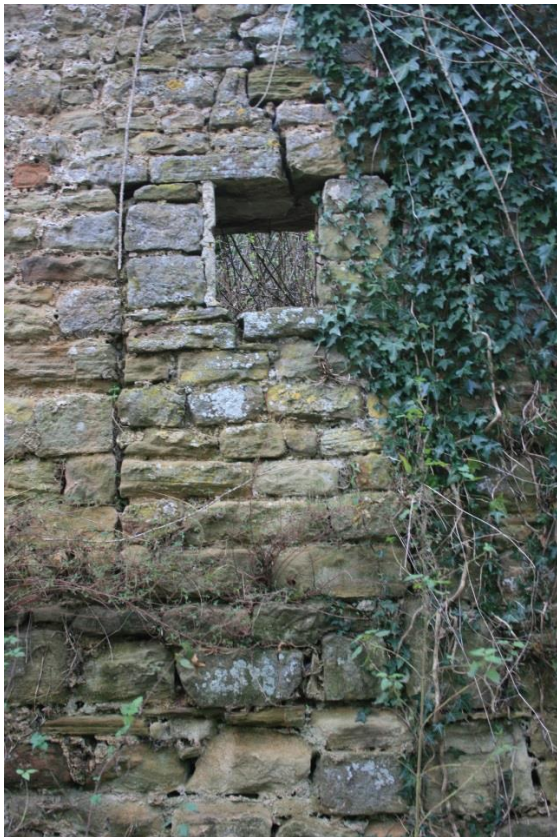
The east wall (exterior); cupboard-like feature at south end



The south gable wall (external). Note state of masonry above opening, upper right



South gable wall (exterior): blocked doorway at south-west corner



South gable wall (exterior): opening on east side, within larger blocked feature



The south-west corner (exterior) showing west wall fabric with curved hollow (partly rendered). The large stone in the foreground at the corner may be an alleged column base



The west wall (exterior) looking north



The north wall (interior): two oven openings within the NE corner



The east wall (interior), looking east over current doorway; the darker green ivy, top right, conceals a 17th-century fireplace, condition unknown



South gable wall interior. Note condition of masonry, particularly above the opening top left. Also note steepness of roof pitch and joist holes for roof and upper floor timbers



South gable wall interior: fireplace opening at base of stack. Note condition of masonry