

EXCAVATING IN THE FACE OF ADVERSITY

July 11, 2014 David Howell Early Medieval, Education, Excavation Caerleon, cuts, Cyfarwdd

It's been a wonderful summer so far. We are well into day four of our two-week block of excavations on a sub-medieval building, which has been nothing but rewarding during our last three seasons of excavations. Things have changed this year though. In 2013, we were officially excavating under the umbrella of the University of South Wales. That is no longer the case. In 2014, we excavate under the joint banner of the 'South Wales Centre for Interdisciplinary and Historical Research' and 'Cyfarwdd', because the History Department under which we used to operate, is in the process of being buried in the ground...or wound up, both descriptions are applicable.

For those with long memories, you'll know that we've been here before. We are not far off the ten-year anniversary of the closure of the archaeology department in the former University of Wales, Newport institution. Back then, Caerleon was a real player on the archaeology circuit, with the likes of the Aldhouse-Greens, Pollard, Chadwick and Howell, all being established names forging ahead with world-leading research. The power players of the day though decided that world class research and an international profile was not what was wanted for the institution at the time, and so out it went.

In the last few weeks it has been confirmed that the History Department at Caerleon is going to be 'consolidated' with a department on another campus over 20 miles away. The History Department was the arm of the former history and archaeology department to survive the last round of cuts. Now, it's time appears to be up as well. Recruitment numbers are the reason, we are told, for this decision.

One of the joys of the last three years has been the bringing back of archaeological excavations within the department. There are several of us archaeologists who survived the culling of the archaeology department back in the day, and we have fought a long fight to win over historians to the merits of our cause. We do that very well. Today we have had three history graduates working with us, Andy, Charlotte and Sarah, all of whom have taken up the trowel while engaging with a history programme. The real sad things about all this, is that students of History will not get this opportunity in the future. Indeed, there will be no future students of history or archaeology anywhere in south east Wales from 2018 on, that is surely the saddest thing of all.



Yet, in the face of ongoing adversity, we rumble on. Indeed for all the doom and gloom above, this excavation continues to be a real pleasure, both in terms of the excellent and highly committed team that we have onboard, and the sheer quality of the excavation material that is coming up. Over the last year and a half, we have enjoyed revealing a building in excess of 15m in length, including a complete, standing bread oven and potential secondary oven or furnace. Every time we think we have completed the story, more walls suddenly appear, significantly increasing the dimensions of the structure. Today was no different.

On day three (Thursday) we identified a new wall feature coming off at right angles from the main structure. Close to one of two significant thresholds, we figured that the openings of this building would be one of the simpler elements to figure out, then the wall emerged. Much of day four was focused on easing out additional information around this feature. However, on a personal note, most of my Day of Archaeology was spent moving spoil tips. When we started, the spoil tips were located in perfectly sensible places, well back from the trenches. However, as all of these new wall features emerge, and the building grows, most of our spoil tips now appear to be sitting directly on top of underlying archaeology. Today I had the joy of moving two spoil tips while the rest of the team got stuck into their features – I'm sure few other site directors volunteer for such tasks!

On the other side of the building, we have found yet another wall, though this time it would appear to be a retaining wall behind the main structure. I am yet to rule out other options though. One of the two thresholds identified was thoroughly cleaned today, and that has proven to be far more substantial than expected before. Is there a possibility that this retaining wall is in fact part of something more complex? It's hard to say, but that is what week two is for I guess. We also found a very early clay pipe bowl, complete and decorated, dating to roughly the 1620s or 1630s. It was the ideal find. While a lot of our artefactual material has been jumbled, to get solid datable material like this is really beneficial. We don't have a lot which helps us date this building (odd given the vast scale of it), but this is the sort of thing which is right in our target zone.



So, our Day of Archaeology, day four of our nine-day window of excavation, was another triumph. Everyone enjoyed themselves; we welcomed four new members, two of whom had no prior experience, and they seemed to love it. Experienced and newcomers alike have benefitted from participating in this project. As a learning opportunity and an engaging experience, our excavation opportunities have been consistently successful. Yet, come the next Day of Archaeology, we will not be posting in relation to a university-led excavation, because the university just does not want us.