

SAUNDERSFOOT AND DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

For its last lecture of the 2015-16 Programme the Society welcomed Dr. Chris Caple of Durham University whose illustrated talk had the intriguing title 'Protect us from Evil: Evidence from Excavations at Nevern Castle 2008-15'. Dr. Caple sought to update the audience on developments at the castle site where archaeologists from Durham, Lampeter and Cardiff Universities, as well as from the Dyfed Archaeological Trust, had been working for over seven seasons.

In 1108 the Norman, Robert FitzMartin, began a modest motte and bailey structure on a spur above the Afon Nyfer at Nevern, to protect the caput of his Barony of Cemais. This first castle was a simple affair of ditches and banks but was soon to be succeeded by more elaborate earthworks supported by extensive palisades and wooden walkways. It was clearly designed as a defensive structure to defend the invaders from native Welsh attacks and in fact the site was captured by Owain ap Gruffydd in 1136 after the battle of Crug Mawr near Cardigan.

The castle may have been abandoned from 1136 to c.1150 when the then FitzMartin was involved in the Matilda/Stephen civil war. From the middle of the century a stone castle began to replace the earth and wooden fortification. Local materials such as slate and clay were employed which had the particular advantages of low cost and speed. The use of clay for example removed the need for slow acting lime mortar. However, it's uncertain whether William FitzMartin or the Lord Rhys, who controlled much of Deheubarth after 1156, was in charge. By 1171 the two men had reached agreement and a dynastic marriage cemented matters.

An odd episode in the castle's turbulent history occurred in 1193 when, with FitzMartin away on crusade, the Lord Rhys's sons imprisoned their father at Nevern. He is freed by another son, Hywel Sais, who later burns the castle to the ground, ending an existence of less than a century during which it repeatedly changed hands between Norman and Welsh.

The ongoing archaeological investigations are producing some unusual finds: nine men's morris boards, cereals, cresset lamps and Dyfed gravelware pottery shards. An analysis of pot shards is revealing some traces of diet and, unusually, no traces of fish have been found. The entrance to the castle has a floor of vertical slates, possibly re-used gravestones, but incised with what may be apotropaic symbols to ward off evil spirits. Witches bottles, containers to trap spirits, have also been unearthed, suggesting that medieval Christianity had strong elements of paganism, or at least superstition, infused within its Pembrokeshire form.

This year's dig will take place between the 26th of June and the 16th of July. Further details can be found at www.neverncastle.com and visitors to the site are welcome.

Dr. Caple was warmly thanked for his fascinating lecture by Mrs. Rosemary Hayes. A new series of lectures will begin in September.