

Trellech – A Stroll Through Time

On Saturday 6th November 2021, thirteen of us (plus three dogs) gathered opposite Court Farm Trellech prior to a visit to a current archaeological dig and a walk around the village and its surroundings. Fortunately the weather gods were being kind to us. We were met by Katie Churchill of Churchill Archaeology who is running a community archaeology project in the village. Katie is a commercial archaeologist and lives in the main house of Court Farm.

We were first given a brief history of Trellech:

The presence of the Neolithic/Bronze Age standing stones would indicate that Trellech was a ritual centre in that period. Nearby to the south, above the Hygga, is the location of an Iron Age fortified farmstead. There is little evidence for Roman settlement in the village but many indications that settlement continued around the Hygga throughout the period. It is thought that Trellech lies at the crossroad of two Roman roads, Gloucester to Usk and Watling Street between Wroxeter and Caerwent or Caerleon. There is no evidence of post-Roman Welsh occupation. There is limited documentary evidence for Norman Trellech. However, the motte and bailey castle looks early, and must have guarded a causeway over the marsh on the road between the Fitz Osbern castles at Chepstow and Monmouth. In 1246, the lordships of Caerleon, Usk and Trellech passed back into the hands of the powerful de Clare family. A planted borough was established, and in 1288 there were 378 burgages recorded, making Trellech one of the largest towns in Wales at that time. It was an unlikely location for a marcher urban centre and the town developed specifically as an industrial centre to support de Clare political and military concerns in Glamorgan. It exploited an abundance of timber for charcoal and was close to the iron ore present in the nearby Forest of Dean. Although very close to the English border, Trellech could still be a dangerous place to settle. In 1295, Trellech was attacked by supporters of Madog ap Llywelyn and 102 burgages were destroyed by fire. The success of Trellech as a borough was short-lived and its gradual decline started in the first quarter of the 14th century as a consequence of the death of the last de Clare male heir at Bannockburn in 1314, the subsequent partitioning of the de Clare lordships, a deterioration in climate and possible competition from nearby Monmouth and Tintern. In 1314 there were 265 burgages remaining. The Black death first struck the area in 1349, Trellech's decline accelerated and the borough was unincorporated by the 17th century. There was a limited resurgence in the 17th century when the Woolpitch Wood Iron Works was set up to re-cycle the mountains of medieval iron slag.

The first visit of the day was to Katie's dig in a field to the south-west of Court Farm. The initial aim of the dig was to find potential evidence of medieval castle defences, associated with a large moat fed by the Olwy and Penarth brooks. Several test pits were dug in the summer of 2021. A test pit on the boggy south western corner of the field revealed lots of charcoal and flint. This may be associated with the late neolithic standing stones and enclosure opposite. Test pits at the top of the field provided 13th/14th century pottery. These were expanded into bigger trenches revealing walling, surfaces and a line of post-holes. Two long machine dug strip trenches were also made across the field and these showed evidence of banks/ditches and stone edges to a possible moat. Several trenches were dug to expose the moat edges. One of these uncovered a possible pre-historic trackway composed of layered slabs of green sandstone (see below). Very small pieces of pottery and charcoal were found sealed between the slabs and a radio carbon date is being obtained. Katie showed the group a selection of finds from the various trenches. The site is

very promising with archaeology spanning periods from the neolithic to post-medieval.



We then walked along the footpath towards Harold's Stones, passing the remains of medieval fish ponds. The existence of the town's medieval fish ponds and a wooden causeway (dendro. date of A.D. 1226-27) over the marsh were confirmed during a Monmouth Archaeology watching brief during groundworks for a flood prevention and drainage scheme. Harold's Stones are a short 3 stone column row of local puddingstone (see below). Lithic finds indicate that they date from the late Neolithic/early Bronze Age.



A resistivity survey by the University of Wales (Newport) in 2002 indicated a circular enclosure, approximately 50m in diameter, to the west of the stones. A targeted excavation in 2003 found a large shallow ditch, two small flint blades and one flint flake in the fill.

Our next stop was to the Twmp Terret Motte (see below).



The motte and bailey at Trelech can be identified, on the basis of size and shape, as one of the early type of castles built during the initial Norman conquest of the area. The bailey stretches to the north and may be of considerable size. The presence of Court Farm to the

south, may indicate a further enclosure in this area. During 2002/2003 excavations of the motte, evidence of a bridge from the motte to the bailey was discovered and a piece of oak from the bottom of the motte ditch provided a radiocarbon date of around 1138.

We then walked north up a trackway that had been the main medieval route through the village. To the west of this trackway was the location of a 2003 excavation by the University of Wales (Newport) which revealed two substantial high status mid-13th century buildings, one of which was interpreted as a possible inn or pilgrim's hospice.

We then made a visit to St Nicholas Church. It is thought that a church has stood on this site since the 7th Century, and the current building dates from the late 13th or early 14th century. Inside the church is a 17th century sundial which shows depictions of the three main attractions of Trellech, Twmp Terret; Harold's Stones; the Virtuous Well. Outside the church is the base of the churchyard cross, with a top that is not original. There is also an interesting large slab of stone, on supports which have faint cross carvings. This is assumed to be an outdoor altar.

Next we hiked over the fields to the Virtuous Well. The well is of medieval origins with an 18th century stone surround. It is traditionally one of nine wells stemming from iron-rich springs, each well cured a different ailment.

Our next port of call was to Stuart Wilson's 'Lost City of Trellech' site. Stuart has been excavating along the catbrook Road since 2002. His initial excavation uncovered part of a medieval house site dating from the mid 13th to early 14th centuries. The site showed evidence of two phases of building, on different alignments, with one phase showing signs of a severe fire. This could be evidence of the Welsh attack of 1295. In 2005, Stuart bought the opposite field and this has revealed a series of high status buildings dating from the 13th century but with some parts being occupied into the early 17th century. The buildings incorporate a round tower (see below) and an enclosed courtyard with well. Stuart interprets this as a defended manor house but the round tower could easily be a dovecote or a corn drying kiln.



We finished off the afternoon with a brisk walk over Henllan Lane (old church lane but where is the church?), down the Llandogo Lane back into the village and into the Lion Inn for a lovely lunch.