

Site Caerlaverock Castle

N.G.R NY 025 656

Project Description

The job, under Kirkdale's archaeological call-off contract with Historic Scotland, was to retrieve for dating purposes certain pieces of timber uncovered in previous excavations. The wood was to be taken, if possible, from 2 places, the first being a box-like structure or sump lined with planks discovered during the 1959 excavations (pit 3) in the moat at the junction between the S curtain wall and the SE tower. The other timber was to be retrieved from the remnants of a wooden bridge across the outer "dry" moat, excavated in 1966. The work was carried out on the 19th and 20th November 1996 and recorded using photography, notes and a location plan imposed on a copy of the location plan for the previous excavations.

Report

Prior to the arrival of the archaeologist, the Historic Scotland squad at the castle had drained the moat as much as possible and built a coffer dam from scaffolding and chipboard around the area. They had managed to reduce the level within the dam to a certain extent even though some water and liquid mud had seeped back in overnight, but despite the use of 2 pumps and several buckets it was not possible with the equipment and time allotted to remove enough silt and sludge to reveal even the chamfered course at the top of the plinth at the base of the curtain wall, although it could be felt some 0.20 m (roughly 8 in or 0.7 ft) below the surface. Photographs and drawings of the excavation show the top of the chamfer to be some 3 ft or 0.9 m above the top of the plank-lined structure. The attempt to retrieve the wood was therefore abandoned. A level was taken on the top of the chamfer for future reference, using as a TBM the concrete manhole cover in the bank of the SW corner of the moat, opposite Murdoch's Tower. This is shown on a general plan of the excavations (ref. 63/047/27 & 3/12/110) with a height of 94.76 ft compared to the notional 100 ft of the datum on the threshold of the entrance into the gatehouse. There is of course no guarantee that the current cover is still the same one as that on the plan. Giving the current manhole cover a notional height of 100 m, the level of the top of the chamfer above the site of the plank construction is 98.98 m.

A sharpened wooden stake, 5 cm in diameter and 70 cm long and curved at the opposite end, was recovered from the silt within the area of the coffer dam by members of the squad. This was kept and handed over to Dr Crone.

The Bridge

A reconnoitring party had dug a hole c 1.0 x 0.7 m in the outer moat and right in the SW corner found the upper part of one of the timber uprights from the bridge. The hole had been roughly backfilled, the turf replaced and had also flooded when the archaeologist arrived on site, due to the disturbance of a rumbling land drain. The aim was to saw 2 sections from the sole plate at the base of the construction. The hole was re-emptied and deepened using a

mattock and shovel and the exposed upright as a guide. The exposure of a bracer, with the study of photographs and drawings from the original excavation, confirmed that the timbers (both wrapped in decaying plastic) were the E bracer and adjacent upright of the northernmost bearer, apparently some 30-40 cm square and the most massive of the 2 sole plates. The hole was therefore enlarged to create enough room to expose both sides of the sole plate and to be able to saw sections out of the wood the base of which, from the original drawings, lay over 1.5 m or 5 ft below the ground surface. The constant flow of water into the trench from the breached field drain and general saturation of the ground was kept under control by pumping, although the regular blocking of the filter nozzle and the shovelling of sticky sludge did hamper the exercise somewhat. Eventually (c1-1.2 m down) the wetness of the ground kept causing parts of the sections to collapse, meaning that any further digging would require the hole to be shored or expanded to step the sides for safety purposes and for clear access to the bearer beam. The time and expense which would have been incurred by this were outwith the scope of the brief and so, after consultation with Dr Crone and the Inspectorate, the bracer and upright were retrieved and the hole backfilled by the squad.

The bracer and upright were photographed and drawn in detail in 1966 (see elevation B and associated plan on drawing 63/047/55) and the timbers appeared to be in the same, well-preserved condition, the jagged broken tops looking exactly the same as 30 years ago. Near the base, the bracer was c 25 cm wide whilst the upright was c 20 cm. The bracer was not socketed into the beam as it appeared to be on the excavation photographs, but the upright was still socketed into the plate and kept fast with dowelling.

3 small miscellaneous fragments of wood were recovered from the excavation backfill and passed on to Dr Crone. 1 of the pieces appeared to be a sawn-off fragment and this may be part of a sample taken at the time, possibly from the base of the bracer, in which case this piece of timber has already been sampled and found unsuitable (Anne Crone, *pers comm*).

Interpretation

Assuming the timber taken from the bridge over the outer moat is suitable for dating, the result would at least date by what time the outer ditch was present as well as the last repair or rebuild of the structure. There is no evidence (to the knowledge of the author) that the uprights are not integral to the sole plate, but there neither is there a guarantee that the timber bearer itself is actually primary.

Should it be considered desirable to make another attempt to retrieve samples from the plank construction, the following suggestions may be useful.

- it is clear that a lot of mud and silt has accumulated around the whole circuit of the moat since the original excavations. It would probably help to get rid of this especially since it is of no archaeological value, with the added bonus of keeping down the rushes which are encroaching on the moat
- a more leak-proof coffer dam would be desirable, as would a drier part of the year

- a heavy-duty pump, such as one used for slurry, would be absolutely necessary to remove enough liquid mud to gain access to the planks
- it will be necessary to retrieve at least 6 planks to get a valid average date (Dr Crone, *pers comm*). This would entail being able to see the structure properly to record the dismantling and labelling of the planks - see the required type of pump above
- the 1960s repointing of the SE tower and partial rebuilding of the S curtain wall has resulted in the accumulation of mortar fragments, discarded stone and other such mason's waste in the area. Has this left the planks undamaged?
- a rough estimate, with the equipment outlined above, would be for 1 archaeologist for 4 days watching the pumping and removal of mason's waste, possibly with another archaeologist for the last day during the removal and recording of the structure.

If the recovery of 2 sections from the N sole plate from the bridge in the outer moat is necessary, the following suggestions may be useful.

- the pump used on site was almost adequate, but another used in tandem would be useful
- the bottom of the bearer is c 140 cm below ground level, which requires a large area to be opened up both for access and for safety - the sides collapse easily (and did so) in such wet ground, so either shoring or, probably more easily, stepping-in of the sides is necessary. An absolute minimum of 2.5 by 2.5 m might be adequate
- once the sole plate has been cleared, a chainsaw would be vital to cut the sections through such a large and solid timber
- considering the size and depth of the area necessary to dig (thankfully through backfill) would probably take 2 people, including at least 1 archaeologist, 4-5 days to retrieve the sections.

Finds

1 wooden stake, pointed at 1 end and curved at the other, 70 cm long, 5 cm diameter. From mud in inner moat near junction between SE tower and S curtain wall.

3 small miscellaneous fragments of wood from backfill of 1966 trench in outer moat.

1 bracer (E) from N bearer of timber structure in outer moat. 25 cm wide, 130 cm long.

1 upright from N bearer of timber structure in outer moat, adjacent to bracer. 20 cm wide, c 92 cm long.

All the above finds were passed on to Dr Crone, AOC (Scotland) Ltd, 21.11.96.

Contexts No contexts were recorded