

# THE PEMBROKESHIRE CEMETERIES PROJECT

EXCAVATIONS  
AT PORTHCLEW CHAPEL  
FRESHWATER EAST PEMBROKESHIRE  
2008

## INTERIM REPORT



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## EXCAVATIONS AT Porthclew Chapel 2008

### INTERIM REPORT

Gan / By

**Duncan Schlee**

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## **SUMMARY**

*During the summer of 2008, trenching and excavation were undertaken at the site of Porthclew Chapel, Freshwater East, Pembrokeshire (NGR SS 02089861). Although the chapel is a standing feature, little if anything is known about its origins or history. Burials were revealed in the vicinity during the 1960s, and in 1999 several cist graves were revealed in a cable trench. These finds suggested the chapel might have early medieval origins. The project goal was to inform future strategies for the management of the archaeological resource including the possibility of scheduling the chapel and cemetery site. The project was funded by Cadw grant aid, PCNPA and DAT.*

*Evidence of a substantial sub-circular enclosure surrounding the chapel (and a variety of other features) was revealed by an initial geophysical survey of the site. This enclosure was the main focus of the excavation. In addition, four trenches were opened to ascertain the extent of the cemetery. A small trench was opened to obtain details of the chapel construction. Elevations of the interior and exterior elevations of the chapel were also drawn.*

*Although evidence for several phases of activity was revealed during the excavation, good dating evidence was at a premium, and full understanding of the sequence of occupation at the site awaits both the results of specialist analysis and additional radiocarbon dating and hopefully further excavation.*

*Five human burials were excavated, which it is hoped will provide dating evidence for the use of the cemetery and useful body of evidence for comparison with skeletal remains from other cemeteries in the area that have been recently excavated as part of the Pembrokeshire Early Medieval Cemeteries Project.*

*The excavation was undertaken by staff from DAT, archaeology students, and volunteers from the local community and beyond.*

*This interim report presents the initial results of the excavation, which will be updated following the results of post excavation specialist analysis of finds and samples*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Project background**

This project emerged from the Cadw-funded Early Medieval Ecclesiastical Sites assessment (EMES) undertaken by Dyfed Archaeological Trust since 2002. The EMES formed part of a pan-Wales, Cadw grant-aided project, intended to redress a notable imbalance in the archaeological record for the period (Ludlow 2000).

Porthclew Chapel (PRN 4194) lies at NGR SS 02089861 within the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park, and close to the settlement and popular beach of Freshwater East. Although a standing ruin, the age and history of Porthclew Chapel is uncertain. The history of the wider community of Porthclew and Freshwater East is also little known (James - DRF PRN 38753). Human burials were disturbed during the construction of a house near the chapel in 1964. In 1999, several stone-lined cist graves were encountered during the laying of an electricity cable in the same area (Schlee 2000 - DRF PRN4402). The cist graves suggested that the existing chapel may be a later development of an early medieval chapel site. Porthclew chapel is therefore one of 38 known or possible early medieval cemetery sites in Pembrokeshire.

In 2008, Dyfed Archaeological Trust were grant aided by Cadw with additional support from the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority (PCNPA) to undertake an archaeological evaluation of the site to clarify its nature, extent and survival, with the aim of informing its future management, including the possibility of scheduling the chapel and cemetery.

### **Project objectives**

The main goal of the project was to obtain information about the nature, extent and condition of the site, to inform decisions on the future management of the site (including the possibility of scheduling the site).

One of the objectives was to ascertain and map the presence and extent of further burials or other features in order to establish the extent of the graveyard or wider area that might require scheduling.

A second objective was to ascertain the presence or absence of an early medieval phase at the chapel site, and to look for evidence of possible earlier periods of activity at the site, or within its immediate vicinity.

In addition to the archaeological objectives, outreach was an important aspect of the project. The majority of the work was undertaken by local volunteers and archaeology students, offering them a rare opportunity to gain archaeological experience.

Because the site is located on private property, it was decided not to publicize the excavation widely. Daily tours of the site were nevertheless well attended by locals and visitors to Freshwater East.

### **Methodology**

Standard archive sources for aerial photographic coverage, and documentary evidence held at the regional Historic Environment Record (HER) were consulted prior to commencement of the fieldwork. The site is not a Scheduled Ancient

Monument (SAM), but is included within a Tir Gofal agri-environment agreement. There is very little documentary or other archive evidence relating to the site.

### **Geophysics**

A geophysical (magnetometry) survey of the surrounding fields was undertaken to ascertain the possible extent and complexity of the site, and to inform the location and extent of trial trenching.

### **Building recording**

Detailed scale drawings of the interior and exterior elevations of the chapel were made to record the current state of the building and its surviving features. This was undertaken both to try and ascertain the likely date of the building and to inform any future consolidation of the surviving fabric of the chapel.

### **Excavation**

Five trenches were opened using a JCB to investigate probable features identified by the geophysical survey and to ascertain the extent of the cemetery. The constraints of the project, however, meant that it was not possible to sample excavate all features of potential archaeological significance.

Trench 1 was a relatively large trench, designed to sample each of several apparent enclosure ditches surrounding the chapel, and part of the interior of the enclosed area, so as to establish the sequence of their construction.

Trenches 4-5 were excavated diagonally across the field to the south of the chapel to ascertain the extent of the cemetery.

Trench 6 was excavated across the north wall of the chapel to ascertain details of its construction, survival and stratigraphic relationships.

All archaeological features were hand-excavated, and recorded using the standard system employed by Dyfed Archaeological Trust. Plans and section drawings were drawn at 1:20 scale and excavated features photographed in digital format. The majority of the fieldwork was undertaken by local volunteers and by students from the University of Lampeter and Bristol, all under the supervision of staff from Dyfed Archaeological Trust. All trenches were backfilled at the end of the excavation.

Excavation of human skeletal material was kept to a minimum, but five inhumations were excavated to provide osteological material for analysis and comparison with material from other cemetery excavations recently undertaken in the area. Charcoal samples for AMS dating, bulk soil samples for the recovery of charred plant remains, monolith samples for pollen analysis, geomorphology and mollusc analysis were also taken.

### **Historical background**

Portclew (PRN 38753) is an example of an 'area' place name being adopted by a particular location. Today the name is shared between four locations: Little Portclew, Portclew Chapel, Upper Portclew and Portclew House. B. G. Charles interprets the name as being derived from *porth*, meaning inlet or bay and *lliw*, meaning 'clear' (or fresh) water and being the name of the stream that flows into Freshwater East Bay. Most of the development in the present village is less than 100 years old.

The earliest known reference to 'Porthllu' is from 1326, in the 'Black Book of the Bishops of St David's', when Porthclew was part of the manor of Lamphey. The reference is to a Thomas Walter of Porthllu holding a bovate of land within a

larger landholding referred to as 'The Sanctuary'. The rents raised from the tenants of Porthclew form a large part of the total returns from Lamphey, perhaps suggesting either that there was a larger population at Porthclew than is now assumed. It has been suggested that 'The Sanctuary' might be centered on Porthclew Chapel (James - DRF PRN 38753).

It has also been suggested that the chapel was dedicated to St Mary, but this may be based on an erroneous interpretation of a medieval document (Brian Howells *pers. comm.*). There is no known dedication to the church or the nearby possible holy well.

## **Geology**

Freshwater East is located on an outcrop of Old Red Sandstone on the northern limb of the Freshwater East Anticline. These deposits, originally laid down in the Late Silurian/Early Devonian geological periods were sculpted by ice sheets and meltwater that truncated the anticline, exposing vertically bedded red and purple mudstones and siltstones, together with fine and coarser sandstones sometimes green in colour. These strata provide the distinctive striped appearance of the weathered bedrock that underlies the site at Porthclew Chapel and which was exposed during the excavation.

Above the bedrock and 'rab', windblown sand has accumulated over thousands of years, as with significant sand encroachments along the south Wales coast, particularly those recorded during the 13th to 15th centuries.

## **Site description**

Porthclew is located at Freshwater East, within the parish of Lamphey, about 2km south of Lamphey village. While it may have had its origins as an early medieval hamlet in its own right, today the name is only associated with three properties and the remains of the chapel.

The standing remains of the chapel are the only immediately visible features of archaeological interest. The presence of human burials, some contained within stone-lined 'cist' graves, has been recorded during the construction of a nearby house in 1964 and during the laying of an electricity cable in 1999.

A possible 'holy' well site is located at SS 02056 98616. The well has a built structure surrounding it and is associated with a hollow way of possible medieval origin, and lies in close proximity to the chapel, but is not recorded as a holy well and has no known dedication.

The fields that are the focus of this project are currently subject to a Tir Gofal agri-environment agreement and are cropped for hay. The main part of the field has, in the recent past, been used primarily for grazing, and has not been ploughed since the 1980s.

Generally, the site is located just off the brow, on the eastern side of a hill, with the ground sloping away to the north, east and south. There are extensive views in these directions, and possibly to the west as well, were it not for the presence of hedges and buildings.

## **EXCAVATION RESULTS**

The locations of all cut trenches are represented in Figure 1.

### **Trench 1** (Figs 1 and 2)

Trench 1 (measuring 20m long, and 4.50m wide) was located so as to characterize a variety of features identified from the geophysical survey. These included a series of ditches apparently enclosing the chapel. A number of possible pits and post holes were identified within the enclosed area, but on excavation, many of these proved unconvincing and have been interpreted as animal burrows or root holes. The fill of one feature contained several human teeth, probably representing a neonate burial. Some post holes were cut into the backfills of the enclosure ditches. No buried soil horizon was identified.

### **Linear feature 106**

This is the latest feature within the excavated area. It appeared to terminate at the southern end of the trench, and probably continued northwards beyond the end of the trench. The feature cut all ditch fills and other cut features, but in places it was hard to define. The apparent irregularity of its base suggests it was not structural or designed to carry running water. It is therefore thought to be a shallow field or property boundary.

### **Sub-circular ditch cuts 116 and 117**

From the evidence of the geophysical survey, these two ditches appear to follow the same alignment and are therefore assumed to be associated with each other. From the excavated evidence, however, it is unclear whether they were both open at the same time. The ditches have different profiles. There is also no surviving *in-situ* evidence for banks associated with either ditch. Several pieces of shale which exhibited possible evidence of pick marks were, however, recovered from some of the ditch fills. These may be derived from former bank material. The ditch fills also show evidence of having been re-cut.

Several post-holes were located between the ditches, where banks are likely to have been located when either or both ditches were functional. It is not clear whether the post holes pre-date or post-date the ditches (and banks).

### *Discussion*

Even with associated banks, neither ditch is sufficiently wide or deep to present an impregnable barrier. There is no evidence for palisade or revetment posts associated with either ditch.

Porthclew Chapel appears to be located well within the area enclosed by these ditches, but there is as yet no evidence to prove that the chapel and enclosures are necessarily contemporary with each other.

It has been suggested that the geophysics survey may indicate an opening in the eastern side of this enclosure.

### **Rectangular? ditch cut 118**

The geophysical survey suggests that this feature is a rectilinear cut with curved corners. The excavated evidence, also suggests this ditch is on a different alignment to the outer ditches, perhaps suggesting they are not contemporary with each other. Within the excavated area however, there was no stratigraphic evidence to demonstrate whether ditch 118 was earlier or later than ditch 117. The ditch is relatively wide in relation to its shallow depth and would not have had a defensive function. Within the excavated area, any bank on the inside edge of this ditch would have been removed by the cutting of features 139.

### *Discussion*

It is not entirely clear from the geophysics whether ditch 118 forms a rectangular enclosure containing the chapel on its eastern edge, or if the chapel is built on top of the ditch.

### ***Ditch cut? 139***

On the geophysical survey this feature appears to be a ditch running along the inside edge of the enclosure formed by ditch 118 (parallel to its north side). The excavation revealed a shallow, broad, flat-bottomed ditch that appeared to cut the southern edge of ditch 118. The southern edge of 139 was itself cut by intercutting pit group 140-143.

### *Discussion*

It is uncertain what this group of features represents. There was no evidence of post-pipes in the fills of pits 140-143, perhaps suggesting they were not post-holes, though this remains the most likely explanation. They appear to respect the boundary formed by ditch 118, and may be associated with it. They may represent a series of 'rubbish' pits cut along the edge of the enclosed area, or perhaps an unfinished ditch constructed by cutting a series of small intercutting pits. Layer 104 appears to be a backfill deposit within a linear hollow formed by the combined cuts of features 118 and 139-143. Its fill had a relatively high charcoal content.

### ***Wall 146***

Wall 146 was built on top of fill 104, and appears to represent a phase of activity that is later than all the enclosure ditches. It is not clear what structure 146 represents, but it may be associated with a possible phase of settlement structures tentatively suggested on the geophysical survey. There are several rectangular features to the north and northeast of the chapel that may represent buildings. Some of these features appear to be built over the backfilled enclosure ditches. A wind-blown sand deposit had accumulated against the north side of wall 146.

### *Discussion*

If wall 146 represents a phase of occupation or settlement, it would appear to be late in the sequence of events at the site, after at least some of the boundary ditches were backfilled and any associated banks had been leveled. Until dating evidence for the underlying ditches is fully analysed and more is understood about this phase, it remains unknown how any settlement on the site relates to the chapel and cemetery. Wall 146 is similar in character to wall 204 in Trench 2. Both features may belong to the same phase.

## **Trench 2**

Trench 2 was one of four trenches located to ascertain the extent of burials in the field to the south of the chapel. The trench contained the well-constructed cist burial of a child (SK003). Other burials in this trench were not excavated, but no evidence of cist structures was apparent. To the south of SK003, ditch 207 is assumed to be a return or continuation of one of the ditches revealed in Trench 1, although which one remains uncertain.

On the northern (inside) edge of the ditch was a stone wall base 204, similar in character to wall 146 in Trench 1. 204 could be a remnant of a stone-faced bank. Although these walls may belong to the same phase, it is interesting that while wall 204 is probably contemporary with ditch 207, in Trench 1 there is no surviving evidence of walls associated with the ditches, or a ditch associated with wall 146.

It is also interesting that there are burials on both sides of ditch 207, suggesting either that it pre-dates the cemetery, or that the cemetery expanded beyond its original boundary.

### **Trench 3**

Trench 3 also contained burials. Two inter-cutting burials were excavated (SK 002 and SK 004), the earlier of which was contained in a cist structure. Evidence of other burials within the trench was noted.

### **Trench 4**

Trench 4 was different from the other trenches in that it contained thick deposits of wind-blown sand. These would appear to have accumulated within or against what appears to be a linear feature on the geophysics survey. The character of this feature was not, however ascertained, but it seems likely to be a constructed feature. Cist burials and plain burials were also present, cut into the wind blown sand deposit. One burial (SK001) was excavated, SK006 (of which only the head and shoulders were revealed) and left *in situ*.

### **Trench 5**

Trench 5 contained concentrations of non-articulated human bone. No evidence of surviving *in situ* burials or burial cuts was identified. The bone may therefore be remnants of ploughed out burials or material that has been transported from elsewhere in the field through plough action.

### **Trench 6**

Trench 6 was located to provide a section across the north wall of the chapel to investigate construction methods and the degree of survival of the chapel below ground. On the inside of the chapel the excavation revealed that the floor surface has been removed. A single post-hole next to the wall face may relate to the construction of the chapel.

Outside, evidence of an episode of repair or renovation of the chapel was suggested by a mortar spread. There was also evidence of a foundation cut for the chapel wall and a rough rubble surface beneath which was located a cist burial (SK005) on a different alignment to the chapel walls.

## **FINDS AND SPECIALIST ANALYSES**

Worked stone, pottery, metal artefacts, animal bone, monolith samples (for possible pollen analysis), mollusc samples and geomorphology samples (for possible thin section analysis) recovered from the excavation are currently in storage awaiting future conservation, processing and analysis. The following analyses are currently under way:

### **AMS Dating**

With contingency funding from Cadw, the following carbon samples have been sent for AMS dating:

| <b>SAMPLE</b> | <b>Fill</b> | <b>Cut</b> | <b>Trench</b> |
|---------------|-------------|------------|---------------|
| <b>1</b>      | <b>138</b>  | <b>118</b> | <b>1</b>      |
| <b>3</b>      | <b>148</b>  | <b>140</b> | <b>1</b>      |
| <b>4</b>      | <b>206</b>  | <b>207</b> | <b>2</b>      |
| <b>5</b>      | <b>109</b>  | <b>116</b> | <b>1</b>      |
| <b>7</b>      | <b>103</b>  | <b>117</b> | <b>1</b>      |
| <b>8</b>      | <b>137</b>  | <b>139</b> | <b>1</b>      |

The AMS dates have recently been received and are included as Appendix 1. The possible implications of the dating evidence are outlined in the conclusions section.

### **Skeletal analysis**

The excavated skeletal material is currently undergoing isotopic analysis and assessment of age, sex and basic pathology.

| <b>Burial</b> | <b>Fill</b> | <b>Cut</b> | <b>Trench</b> |
|---------------|-------------|------------|---------------|
| <b>SK001</b>  | <b>402</b>  |            | <b>4</b>      |
| <b>SK002</b>  | <b>302</b>  | <b>303</b> | <b>3</b>      |
| <b>SK003</b>  | <b>202</b>  | <b>203</b> | <b>2</b>      |
| <b>SK004</b>  | <b>304</b>  | <b>305</b> | <b>3</b>      |
| <b>SK005</b>  | <b>612</b>  | <b>613</b> | <b>6</b>      |

### **Bulk flotation samples**

Bulk flotation samples from the main enclosure ditches and selected pit and post-hole fills are currently being processed.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

### **Archaeology**

The excavations at Porth Clew have provided important information on the nature and character of the early medieval cemetery and confirmed the existence of significant archaeological features across most of the survey area.

Although the results from the excavations are necessarily limited, a considerable amount of information has been recovered, This has perhaps resulted in more questions being raised, than have been answered.

Some aspects of the chronology of the features is clarified by 6 AMS C14 dates obtained from the lower fills of the ditch features in Trenches 1 and 2. A preliminary interpretation of the dates indicates that all of the features appear to date to the early medieval period, spanning a range from AD550 to AD 1010 at 2 sigma calibration.

These dates suggest that the rectilinear enclosure ditch (118) and the inter-cutting pit group (140-143) are contemporary and are the earliest features. Of the two curvilinear enclosure ditches, the inner one (117) is possibly earlier than the outer one (116). This evidence may suggest that the enclosed area was systematically enlarged over time. The dates, stratigraphy and ceramics may also suggest that the possible evidence for occupation (represented by wall 146) post-dates both enclosures 118 and 117. The chapel is clearly later than the rectilinear enclosure, and possibly the outer enclosures too.

The dating evidence obtained so far, raises several questions about what kind of site the enclosures at Porthclew represents, its longevity and how it may have changed and developed. It will be particularly interesting to obtain dating evidence from the recovered burials, small finds and ceramics, to ascertain at what time the cemetery was established in relation to the chapel, enclosures and settlement.

Clearly, the site is proving to be unique in terms of excavated early medieval sites in Pembrokeshire. It is providing new and significant information which has the potential to greatly increase our understanding of the early medieval period in a variety of ways, both within the region and further afield.

### **Monument management**

From a monument management perspective, the excavation has demonstrated that significant archaeological features important to understanding the context of the site exist beyond the immediate vicinity of the chapel itself. Better understanding of the character of the buried features has clarified the likely implications of potential future threats. It was not, however, possible to evaluate the character and extent of all the archaeology within the study area, or whether archaeological significant features extend beyond the study area.

Since 2005, these fields have been subject to a management agreement between PCNPA and the landowners who are sympathetic to and enthusiastic about the conservation and protection of the site. However, the masonry of the chapel will continue to deteriorate if not conserved in the immediate future. Statutory protection will encourage and enable this to be achieved. In addition, although the land is currently sympathetically managed, until the full character, complexity, importance and especially the extent of the site both within and beyond the current study area is ascertained, this management may not

encompass the full extent of the significant buried archaeology. While the site remains unprotected, the potential for future damage to the important below-ground, cropmark and earthwork aspects of the site remains from a variety of potential threats such as metal detecting, inadvertent conflicts between archaeological and agricultural or habitat management goals, and from housing or infrastructure development.

Any original earthwork features surrounding the chapel have been ploughed flat by previous agricultural activity. Cut features and grave structures survive immediately below the plough zone, which varies in depth across the site. Bone preservation on the site is generally fairly good, due to the sandy soil conditions. However, some graves lie close to the present ground surface, and grave structures would be vulnerable to ploughing or other disturbance (as has occurred previously). In addition, the geophysical survey has identified areas of possible settlement.

While some evidence of stone-built walls was revealed by the excavations (late in the stratigraphic sequence), the period, extent, character and degree of survival of these features remains unknown, as does their vulnerability.

### **Outreach**

The project was very successful from the point of view of student training, hands-on public involvement and public outreach generally. Archaeology students from Lampeter and Bristol universities gained a variety of excavation experience, and, as well as engaging volunteers new to archaeology, participants from previous excavations at West Angle Bay and Maenclochog were also able to attend.

Engagement in excavations, followed by public presentations such as the 'Pembrokeshire Day School' brings a new audience to the archaeology of the region, fostering new interest, understanding and support for the protection, management and enjoyment of cultural heritage in both locals and visitors to the area.

### **Archaeological research**

The excavations have demonstrated that although not yet fully understood, the site clearly has considerable potential to clarify the local history and development of Porth Clew and Freshwater East. The site also offers an opportunity to add to an increasing body of important new information on early medieval ecclesiastical and secular sites in Pembrokeshire such as Brownslade, Angle, St Brides and St Ishmaels and Maenclochog. The site may provide a good example of how small settlements in Pembrokeshire have developed, perhaps in continuity, since the prehistoric, with early and later medieval phases of occupation and/or ritual or ecclesiastical activity represented on the same site.

The well preserved skeletal remains could provide an assemblage of national importance to research into the early medieval period in Wales, for comparison with the skeletal assemblage recovered from the recent excavations at Brownslade Barrow.

This archaeological potential, combined with the outreach potential make it a good candidate for a broader programme of archaeological excavation for comparison with the numerous other early medieval coastal cemetery sites around the Milford Haven waterway.

## **Future work**

Several aspects of the site remain to be understood. These include:

- How far within and beyond the present study area does the cemetery extend?
- Is there a prehistoric phase on the site?
- Is there an early medieval ecclesiastical settlement or religious site?
- Is there evidence of later medieval settlement at the site? How far does it extend?
- How do the various enclosure ditches relate to the standing chapel?
- How do the phases of activity on the site relate to episodes of coastal sand inundation?
- Over what time span has there been a cemetery at the site?
- Full finds analysis for metal objects and pottery
- Dating of human bone and analysis of diet, pathology and ethnicity.

## **SOURCES**

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