

The 154th Annual Summer Meeting Carmarthen 2007

The summer meeting in 2007 was held at Trinity College Carmarthen from August 12th - 18th, a period which threatened appalling weather, but which in the event was showery and occasionally drizzly but also included periods of sunshine, providing fine views of the Towy valley, the river around which the programme for the meeting was woven.

The meeting was conceived and organised by Gwilym Hughes and Marion Page of Cambria Archaeology, with the help of members of the Carmarthenshire Antiquarian Society and of Cambrian members from the area. The programme booklet, with full colour illustrations for the first time, was prepared by Marion Page who had also made all the day to day arrangements for the excursions. Nansi Mascetti had agreed to look after accommodation matters at Trinity College, a role which proved to be unexpectedly taxing because, despite the efficiency of the management of the Halliwell Centre where the dining and lecture rooms were, the plumbing in the accommodation blocks was frequently troublesome. Frances Llewellyn had taken care of recruitment and the meeting finances.

Sunday August 12th.

Members arrived in Carmarthen in the late afternoon and were joined for dinner by the winners of the G.T.Clark Prizes and the Blodwen Jerman prize, this year for the first time awarded for university dissertations. After dinner the prizes and cheques were given out by the President-elect Tom Lloyd (see separate report in this volume). This short ceremony was followed by informal introductions to the region by Gwilym Hughes and by Ken Day who illustrated his talk with some of the splendid photographs which graced his recent book *Beloved Towy*.

Monday August 13th

This was the longest excursion of the week, going right up towards the source of the river near Llyn Brienne. The roads in the upper reaches were a test of the skills of our driver, Dave from Morris Brothers, but the party emerged triumphantly at the dam approximately on time after more than one attempt to cross the river. Our difficulties were appropriate to the theme of the day which concentrated on roads and bridges, from Roman times to the twentieth century. The journey was made especially enjoyable by the fine views and the very expert commentary from Heather James who had spent many years on archaeological fieldwork in the area and had a deep knowledge of all periods.

The first stop was at the site of the 1832 Chain Bridge over the Towy just north of Llandovery, replaced in 1883 by the current stone bridge which we were able to admire from the safety of the far from admirable footbridge added in the brutalist 1960s. The original configuration of the rivers around Llandovery had changed a good deal over the centuries which had made it a challenge to bridge builders of all periods and had also made the recognition of Roman crossing points particularly difficult.

In the modern pattern of roads and movement, the upper Towy valley seems to be a backwater and a dead end but in earlier times there was a good deal of movement up the valley and over the watershed into Ceredigion. Just south of the present dam and reservoir, built in 1972, is the site of the large Cistercian Grange of Ystrad-ffin and Nant y Bai. The monastic history of the land is today reflected in the isolated but still cared for Chapel of St Paulinus rebuilt in 1821 by the then landlord of this region, Lord Cawdor. Another reminder of the economic importance of these mountains is the village of Rhandirmwyn where the silver/lead mines have a claim to have been first exploited by the Romans. However the main period of their prosperity was the late 18th century when they were developed by the Cawdor estate. Some buildings relating to a short-lived revival of zinc mining in the 1930s survive on the steep slopes above the modern village, but time did not allow a visit to them.

On the return journey a visit was made to the idyllic turnpike bridge at Dolauhirion. This was a safe crossing point but something of a detour from the direct route through Llandovery and the main road returned south, to the Chain Bridge, in the 19th century. This elegant stone bridge was commissioned from William Edwards who had built to the spectacular single arch bridge at Pontypridd but was probably built by his son; it clearly owes much to the Pontypridd design. The toll house here was destroyed in the Rebecca Riots in 1844.

At this spot members were also able to see evidence of the Roman road running towards the fort beneath the present church at Llanfair-ar-y-Bryn. Recent excavations by Cambria Archaeology at this fort, prompted by splendid geophysical survey information and occasioned by road-straightening proposals, had produced such interesting results that the road scheme has been abandoned.

After lunch in various hostels in Llandovery members were divided into two groups. One was given an illustrated lecture on the Roman excavations by Nikki Cook of Cambria Archaeology in the Heritage Centre,

while the other visited the ruins of Llandovery Castle under the guidance of Charles Hill, also of Cambria. Whereas the history of the castle, frequently changing hands between Norman and Welsh, was relatively well documented, there had been no serious analytical study of the surviving structure. The groups then swapped around before driving back to Carmarthen along the southern bank of the river.

In the evening the new President, Tom Lloyd, was inducted and gave his Presidential Address '*The Emergence of the architectural profession in Wales 1770-1830*' followed by a wine reception. Due to the fact that our President for 2006-7, Richard Avent, had been tragically killed in a diving accident, the induction was carried out by the Chairman of Trustees, Professor Muriel Chamberlain.

Tuesday August 14th

The weather forecasters had predicted appalling rain and gales for Tuesday, but in the event it simply rained quietly and persistently which did not prevent the party fulfilling the programme (which luckily included significant periods under cover), though the famed views from Dinefwr Castle and from its surrounding parkland were restricted by mist and cloud.

The day started at the castle where Sian Rees of Cadw spoke about the history of the castle and the work that Cadw had undertaken in consolidating the ruins. The site, on the summit of a cliff overlooking the river was a dominating one and legends associated the site with the early kings of Deheubarth. However the earliest documentary references date from the 12th century, the time of the Lord Rhys and it is probable that the earliest surviving structures, the round keep and the curtain wall of the inner ward were built by his son, Rhys Gryg, in the early 13th century. After the Edwardian conquest the gateways were modified and a hall and chamber block were built as the castle became a centre of English administration, along with the now-vanished township on the slopes below. By the late 17th and 18th centuries the castle was a ruin, but one so ideally placed and so romantic that it became the focus for the design of a renowned picturesque landscape. Perhaps rather at odds with the romance of lost power was the subsequent construction of a summerhouse on top of the great keep, but the view down the valley from this shelter was spectacular. Sadly it was denied us that morning!

On returning towards Newton House, the 16th - 19th century successor to the castle, the party was addressed by Emma Plunkett-Dillon of the National Trust who outlined the history of the park. When George Rice and his wife Cecil came to live at Newton in the 1750s it contained all the elements necessary for a naturalistic parkland, the castle, valleys and rocks and ancient oaks, together with a herd of white Park Cattle (still surviving in genetic purity). With advice from Capability Brown, they selectively felled trees and planted new clumps to subtly enhance the interplay of near and distant views. The resultant landscape became the epitome of fashionable naturalism. Dr Plunkett-Dillon explained the detailed survey work that the Trust was carrying out to identify the changes made to the previous, more formal, park and to map the modifications later made to reflect subsequent fashions in gardening.

During a buffet lunch in Newton House, Gwilym Hughes gave an illustrated lecture on his excavations on the two overlapping Roman forts discovered in the eastern part of the park in 2003. The discovery resulted from a geophysical survey commissioned by the Trust and in 2005 a small scale excavation confirmed the presence of a large early fort with wooden buildings, overlain by a smaller fort utilising the older defences as an annexe. A civilian settlement had arisen outside the entrance to the later fort, but the military occupation does not seem to have been very long, spanning the late 1st and early 2nd century AD.

Again the party had been divided into two groups, the lunch and lecture alternating with a tour of Newton House which was displayed as it would have been in 1912, a date which provided the opportunity to display the role of the butler and housekeeper in the basement rooms and, upstairs, permitted visitors to sit on the sofas and around the dining table - a privilege denied in most National Trust Houses! It is ironic that such a beautiful and romantic setting should have at its centre a building whose final chrysalis is so contrastingly ugly!

In the afternoon the party visited the church of St Teilo in the centre of Llandeilo, a town whose concentric street plan still may reflect its monastic origin. The monastery was traditionally founded by St Teilo a contemporary of St David in the 6th century and by the 9th century had become a notable centre of learning and religious authority. Later affiliated with Talley Abbey and subsequently the bishopric of St Davids the town flourished through the middle ages and into the 18th and 19th centuries through association with three major estates, Dinefwr, Golden Grove and Derwydd and through its location at a notable river crossing, with a road bridge and, later, the railway.

In the church the party was welcomed by the vicar the Rev Dr Peter Bement who spoke about the early history of the site and about the 9th century Gospel book, now in Lichfield Cathedral, but once at Llandeilo. The donation of

the book to St Teilo's monastery by the Welshman Gelli is recorded in the back of the book, together with records of land agreements which are the earliest instances of written Welsh. Below these Welsh additions are further notes in Anglo-Saxon made after the book had been taken to Lichfield in the kingdom of Mercia. A new exhibition about the Gospel book had been established in the foot of the tower featuring a digital facsimile of the book using the British Library's 'turning the page' technology.

Tom Lloyd spoke about the architectural history of the church which had been rebuilt in the 1840s, only the tower remaining from the medieval church. The story of the re-building was a comedy, or perhaps a tragedy of errors, involving a very naive churchwardens' committee who quite mis-managed an architectural competition, upsetting many architects, until turning to George Gilbert Scott. The church has recently undergone a radical re-ordering which had provided a number of small rooms in the north aisle beneath a large social space separated from the church by a glass screen. Another mezzanine floor at the back of the nave, reached by a striking spiral stair, was just nearing completion. These changes, which impacted surprisingly little on the visitor's impression of the church interior, had greatly increased the flexibility of use for the parish.

The final visit was to the fine stone bridge over the Towy where Gwilym Hughes and Tom Lloyd spoke about its significance and history. Several early paintings record the sequence of bridges, built, destroyed and repaired over the centuries. It is likely that the Roman first bridged the river close to this point and the abutments of the medieval seven-arched bridge can be seen a little way downstream. The central arches of the medieval bridge were destroyed in a flood in 1795 and repaired in wood. However the restored bridge proved too narrow for the increasing traffic and in 1843 it was decided to build a new bridge. As with the church, the costing of this project was unrealistic and an initial tender of £6,000 had become £21,000 by 1848 when the bridge was finally completed by Edward Haycock. Despite the chequered history of its building this 145ft single span, the third longest in Britain at the time, was, and still is, much admired.

Tom Lloyd also drew attention to Moreb, the house close to the bridgehead. This had been built in 1813 for the agent of the Golden Grove estate and was a very early instance of the Tudor Revival style in Britain. The architect was James Pigot Pritchett of York, a notable architect in the north but who had been born on Lord Cawdor's estate and returned to carry out several local projects for him.

In the evening the Public Lecture was held in the Halliwell Suite at Trinity College. The speaker was Brinley Jones erstwhile Director of the University of Wales Press and retiring president of the National Library of Wales. He spoke on Sir John Williams, a native of Carmarthenshire who had been the driving force behind the foundation of the Library and the donor of some of its most precious books and manuscripts.

Wednesday August 15th

This day the party divided into two groups for the whole of the day.

Option 1

This tour was led by Marian Page and Tom Lloyd and went first to Dryslwyn where members climbed the steep path to the castle and were rewarded with magnificent views of the Towy valley. John Kenyon, who had travelled specially from Cardiff, explained the structure of the 12th/13th century castle, built by various Welsh lords and slighted after Owain Glyn Dwr's rebellion in the early 14th century. It passed to Cadw in 1980 and extensive excavations have since been carried out. The remains of the adjacent defended village, revealed by the same excavations, were also examined.

The party then proceeded to Aberglasney, most famously associated with the Elizabethan Bishop of St. Davids, Bishop Rudd. An introductory talk by Penny David explained both the partial restoration of the 18th century house and the now largely completed restoration of the garden. Members were free to wander round the restored cloister garden, with its formal parterres, and the very attractive walled gardens. It was also possible to see the excavations connected with the gatehouse. Members then enjoyed an excellent lunch in the restaurant.

The final visit was to the National Botanic Garden of Wales, created on the site of Sir William Paxton's Middleton Hall. Paxton also built the famous folly devoted to the memory of Lord Nelson, clearly visible on the hill above. The 'necklace' of seven lakes is being restored alongside the garden. Many members have already seen the famous Great Glasshouse, designed by Sir Norman Foster, but they could now also see the very attractive tropical glasshouse in the double-walled garden, designed by a famous American (but Welsh-born) architect, John Belle. Tom Lloyd explained that the plan of Middleton Hall (burnt down in 1931) laid out in stone, near the Great Glasshouse, was misleading because it was considerably scaled-down from the original, something which had long puzzled many members!

Option 2

This tour was led by Gwilym Hughes and Ken Murphy, the Director of Cambria Archaeology and the party travelled in two minibuses.

The first visit was to the spectacularly-sited Carreg Cennen castle. This rock was probably first fortified by the Welsh princes of Deheubarth but it was over-run by the English in 1277 and the present castle was almost certainly built after this date by John Giffard and his son, supporters of Edward I. The central core of the castle is a square inner ward with twin-towered gatehouse, two corner towers and a range of domestic buildings along the east wall. Subsequently the entrance was strengthened by a barbican with a long stair and six drawbridges. Finally the eastern slopes of the rock were enclosed within an angular outer ward with a small twin-towered gatehouse. All this building was probably completed before the mid 14th century. The castle fell to Owain Glyndŵr and was last garrisoned in the Wars of the Roses by the Lancastrians. The Yorkists then ordered its demolition, but clearly did not check the job because the walls still remain to a considerable height!

This castle is managed by Cadw but ownership lies with the farm below. This has proved to be an opportunity for diversification and the owner, Mr Llewellyn, spoke to members over lunch in the rebuilt barn (using oak grown on the farm) which he has made into a simple restaurant for visitors and walkers. He spoke of the way in which he has tried to combine dairy farming with low-key tourism by maintaining rare and local breeds, free-range hens and other animals who can interact with visitors, attracted by the castle and by a network of footpaths. The menu in the café is simple but all locally made and it provided much-needed employment for the area.

After lunch the party took a scenic drive over Mynydd Du, an upland common with a palimpsest of field remains from Bronze Age cairns, Roman campaigning forts and roads and later deserted settlements and farmstead, with considerable evidence of 18th and 19th century quarrying, exploiting the limestone and ironstone. The geology and natural history of the area also holds considerable interest and members were delighted to see two red kites wheeling above them as they drove along the crest of the ridge.

The final visit of the day involved a longish walk, past a recently erected menhir, a memorial to Gwynfor Evans MP, to the Iron Age hillforts of Garn Goch. The nearer enclosure, encircling a minor summit, is very badly eroded and, without guidance, it is likely that everyone would have walked through it without noticing. The larger one, however, could not be missed! A single massive collapsed wall encloses an approximately rectangular area 11 hectares in extent. The wall at the narrow west end is several metres high and dominates the valley approach; the ramparts on the long north and south sides are slighter but at the east end the wall thickens again. Here, where the hill slopes gently down, there has been a good deal of disturbance, including an unrecorded trench dug through the rampart. It was felt that this might usefully be re-excavated in the hope of finding revetment walls which could not be recognised anywhere on the circuit. The evidence for entrances was ambiguous but they must have been simple gateways. Several narrow sallyports or posterns had been recorded and the party examined one mid-way along the southern side.

Within the enclosure, lying along the highest point of the ridge, is a huge oval cairn 50 x 15m and more than 3m high. There is a possibility that this is an untouched Neolithic long cairn though no hint of internal structure could be seen. There is only one recognisable round hut platform but there are two sub-rectangular enclosures in the sheltered but rather boggy central hollow. It was judged that these were probably medieval or post-medieval and one was unusually long and narrow (30m x 10m) and might possibly be a 'sheepcote' a type of late medieval agricultural structure more common in the Cotswolds but recently recognised in the uplands near Pontardulais

Thursday August 16th

Thursday was entirely devoted to a study of Carmarthen town which can justly claim to be the oldest town in Wales and, until the industrial growth of early 19th century south Wales, the largest. Now much of its history is hidden, but has been revealed by extensive excavations by Heather James and her late husband Terry in the area of the Roman fort and the later Roman town (Moridunum), and also in the medieval town, notably on the great Franciscan friary site just outside the town walls and now beneath a large shopping centre. The royal castle of Carmarthen is also difficult to see, its dominating site overlooking the river crossing now occupied by the County Council buildings, built in its outer ward in the 1920s. But, when you know where to look, much more of it survives than many people imagine and recent clearance and excavation around the west gate has made it once more a feature of the townscape.

During a tour which began near St Peter's church at the junction of the Roman fort and the Roman town, delineated now by streets rather than ramparts, we had the benefit of several speakers, notably Heather James herself, Edna

Dale-Jones, Tom Lloyd and Charles Hill. Many people had also bought the recently published booklet by Cambria Archaeology which conveniently brought together all their recent research and included a number of useful reconstruction views of the town at various periods.

Edna Dale Jones spoke about the 18th century houses along Spilman Street, notably the Ivy Bush Hotel which had been a notable coaching inn owned by the father of General Nott, who returned from victories in India to a hero's welcome and is commemorated by a large statue and a grandiose epitaph in St Peter's church. Tom Lloyd spoke about the architectural history of the building, set back from the road and overlooking the river valley, which had been built, originally as a small villa, by the architect John Nash when he first set up his practice in Carmarthenshire. Nothing of the Nash house can now be seen.

At the castle Charles Hill outlined the history of the Norman conquest, initially based on a motte further down the valley at Rhyd y Gors which was replaced in about 1106 by a similar motte and timber castle here at the river crossing. The new castle had been ordered by Henry I as a royal base, asserting his authority over Norman barons and native Welsh alike. During the 12th and 13th centuries it changed hands more than once and was repeatedly attacked, notably by the Lord Rhys. Edward I used Carmarthen as his base for the conquest of south Wales and it became the administrative centre for the region. Twice captured by Owain Glyndwr and attacked during the Civil War, enough remained for it to be used as a prison until the early 20th century. The party visited the original motte, still surviving behind the County Hall encased in a stone wall built about 1230, and the gatehouse, rebuilt after the Glyndwr attacks, and newly cleared and conserved.

From there Tom Lloyd led the party down towards the medieval quays, lost in an unfortunate 1960s road scheme, and back to the Guildhall via a street of fine town houses where 'pine end plaques' were to be seen recording the ownership of party walls in these buildings. At the Guildhall, where a Court session precluded entry, Mr Lloyd spoke about the design of this fine classical building, one of the first to be seen in west Wales. It had been designed by the London architect Sir Robert Taylor, brought in by two local MPs. Subsequently the market area beneath had been filled in and a portico added. Sadly the current removal of original render has damaged the subtlety of the facade.

After lunch the party walked down Lammas Street past the Greyfriars site, then back to the Market Square and along King Street to St Peter's church. At the church the party was met by the vicar, Dr William Strange who spoke about the history of the church which stood within the Roman town. Particularly notable are a series of fascinating and often very long funerary inscriptions of 17th - 19th century date.

The bus returned to take the party to the Carmarthen County Museum, but due to new parking restrictions it was not possible to stop at the Roman amphitheatre on the way, as had been intended. This lay just beyond the area of the Roman town and close to the site of the Priory of St John and St Teulacus, the focus of the medieval Welsh town which had flourished in the earlier middle ages alongside the Norman town at the east end of the ridge.

The party was welcomed to the Museum by the Chairman of the Carmarthenshire Antiquarian Society, Roy Davies and by Chris Delaney, the Chief Heritage Officer for Carmarthen County Council. Mr Delaney gave a short history of the Palace of the Bishops of St Davids in which the museum was housed. The palace, one of several owned by the bishops, had suffered from fire and neglect on several occasions but the skeleton of a 14th century ecclesiastical plan with cloisters could still be recognised within the current building. After a very sumptuous tea provided by the Society, Cambrians explored the museum galleries.

The Annual General Meeting of the Cambrian Archaeological Association was held in the evening. At this meeting Mr Gwilym Hughes resigned as a Trustee, due of the pressure of work in his new position as Chief Inspector of Ancient Monuments with Cadw, and Mrs Heather James was elected in his place.

Friday August 17th

The last day of the meeting brought the party to the mouth of the Towy at Llansteffan where Ms Eiluned Rees was the guide, and to Laugharne on the Taf estuary where the castle had been excavated and conserved under the direction of our late President, Richard Avent. Dr Kate Roberts of Cadw spoke at the two castles and Tom Lloyd spoke at Laugharne church.

The visit started in the church where tea and cakes were served. The church is a large medieval building in the centre of the village; the nave may be 12th century but the church has been added to and restored several times. The latest restoration in 1972 revealed some fragmentary late medieval wall paintings. Ms Rees gave an introduction to

the history of the village, original an agricultural and fishing village but, since the coming of the railway to Ferryside across the river, a favoured holiday resort in which nearly every cottage took in paying guests. She later led a tour of the village while Dr Roberts took other members of the party up to the castle on the headland.

The site of the castle was first defended in late prehistory and the original 12th century earthwork castle re-used these defences. This early ringwork castle changed hands several times between the Welsh, Normans and, later, English. The date of the present castle is uncertain. The upper ward has a curtain wall which may be late 12th century in date with a small round tower and a square gate tower which may be slightly later. The twin-towered gatehouse and curtain wall and towers of the lower ward probably belong to the period of the Edwardian conquest, but the domestic buildings abutting the inner ward are undated. The final period of historical importance for the castle was in the late 15th century when it was held by Jasper Tudor, the uncle of Henry VII. At that time the gatehouse was modified to provide more comfortable apartments.

On the return walk to the village Tom Lloyd spoke about Plas, the large Georgian house below the castle (currently under repair and swathed in plastic sheeting) which had been the home of Sir John Williams (subject of the public lecture) for several years around 1910.

After lunch at the Forge Lodge near St Clears the party proceeded to Laugharne where they first visited the church, set a little apart from the town on a steeply sloping site and surrounded by yew trees and old gravestones. The church is tall and cruciform with a crossing tower, its unusual size reflecting the patronage of the powerful de Brian family who held the castle. The interior is crowded with monuments, including a very small wheel-headed cross, medieval effigies and many mural tablets with long and interesting inscriptions. In the 18th and early 19th centuries Laugharne was a place where fashionable debtors could retire to and live cheaply in some of the good houses built in the earlier days of Laugharne's wealth as a small port. The main street is still one of the most attractive in south west Wales.

Laugharne castle stands right on the edge of the sea. It was part of a series of Norman earthwork castles designed to control and guard the river crossings and routeways into south Wales. The relatively compact stone castle, of which two large round towers on the north side survive, dates from the mid 13th century and was elaborated through the 14th century. By the late 16th century, however, it had fallen into decay but was rescued by Sir John Perrot who converted it into a Tudor mansion. This house was attacked and badly damaged by the Parliamentarians during the Civil War and was never occupied again. The castle ruins became part of the garden of a fine 18th century house and the outer ward retains this role for the public with rose beds and, characteristic of this seaside town, cockle shell paths. A new semi-circular arbour has been placed within this garden as a memorial to Richard Avent who, between 1976 and 1993 excavated the complex history of the inner ward. This wooden seat, beautifully made by Cadw's maintenance staff, is set on a circular pavement of stone taken from a selection of Welsh Guardianship sites with which Richard had been particularly associated.

The final roll call for the return to Carmarthen was rapidly achieved as people were driven to the bus by a very heavy shower. This presaged a downpour which continued through Saturday as people returned to their homes!