

Excavation and survey at Oystermouth Castle

Descriptions of sites and assessment of archaeological importance

A summary of the documentary history and a detailed description of the masonry remains of Oystermouth castle is provided by RCAHMW (2000, 248-72, from which most of this account is drawn. Little is known about the early history of the castle, from either physical remains or documentary sources. The builder was presumably William de Londres (d 1231), as his son Maurice de Londres is recorded as lord of Oystermouth in 1151 when he granted the advowson of the church to Ewenny Priory. RCAHMW considers it likely that its bailey is represented by 'the embanked outwork set on the lower saddle to the north', although Davies (2006, 2 & fig 1) thinks that this is more likely to be a post-medieval quarry. He suggests that the earthwork castle is more likely to have been a ringwork, given the rocky nature of the site, and that such a ringwork might be represented by 'the scarp above the courtyard'.

The castle itself does not appear in the record until 1215 when it was burnt as part of the campaign carried out against the Normans in Gower by Maelgwn ap Rhys and Rhys Ieuanc. The last member of the de Londres family, Thomas Maurice, is believed to have died with no heir at around that date, so the castle passed back to the lords of Gower, the de Braose, when it was returned by the Welsh.

The earliest surviving stonework, in the keep, was probably already have been in existence by then: it is considered by RCAHMW to be of 12th century date, although it does not contain any characteristic features. Oystermouth was held by the de Braoses up to Alina, the last of the line, and then by her son John Mowbray and his descendants, apart from a hiatus in the second half of the 14th century when the Beauchamp Earls of Warwick were lords of Glamorgan. The de Braoses regarded their Gower base as one of their principal seats, and there is documentary evidence that they resided for at least some of the time at Oystermouth rather than Swansea. They would have been responsible for most of the rest of the surviving masonry structures. Alina is traditionally credited with building the chapel block, and the Decorated style architectural details of its architecture would certainly accord with her tenure of the lordship (1327-31). All the Mowbrays and Beachamps were absentee lords, as is reflected in the minimal additions to the fabric after the construction of the chapel block.

In the post-medieval period the castle was held, still as part of the demesne of the lords of Gower, by the Earls of Worcester (later Dukes of Beaufort), apart from the period of the Commonwealth when it was held by Oliver Cromwell. There is no evidence, however, that it saw any military action and there is no clear evidence either for any building work of post-medieval date. The Dukes of Beaufort continued to hold it until 1927 when it was bought by Swansea Borough Council. Clearance and restoration work was undertaken in the 1840s and 1870s by the antiquary George Grant Francis, including a careful restoration of the tracery in the chapel window. Further consolidation and restoration works were undertaken by the council after it acquired the castle (for example in 1997, Sell 1997), of which the current programme is only the most recent.

The castle buildings occupy a spur the southern side of an amphitheatre-like public park on the hillside directly overlooking the sea which lies to the east; this spur continues southwest of the gatehouse, where it is known as The Knoll. There is another, saddle-shaped ridge to the east, with a mound known as Castle Tump on its southern summit. The bowl-like area between the two ridges is known as The Green. A programme of geophysical survey was carried out by Davies (2006) for the Friends

of Oystermouth Castle. This examined four areas in, respectively, the inner courtyard, the exterior of the gatehouse and The Knoll, The Green and Castle Tump. Two programmes of excavation were undertaken by the Trust in the summer of 2010. One, carried out as a commercial contract for the city council investigated those areas within the inner courtyard and the chapel block that will be affected by the proposed visitor improvements, did not provide significant new information on the castle's development. The other, a community excavation, examined the area of the western gate tower and The Knoll. This located the line of the outer wall of the west tower, which proved to take the form of a rectilinear foundation, and the castle ditch. This ditch proved to be extremely massive; a sondage near the presumed line of its southern edge picked up the rising bedrock in this position, but a sondage further north was still within the upper fills when it had to be halted due to safety considerations. South of the ditch, the bedrock on The Knoll proved to lie close to the surface. Trench 2 had no medieval structures or deposits. Most of Trench 3 was similar, but the eastern end was not fully excavated in the time available. In addition a topographic survey by total station was undertaken as a schools work experience programme on the south side of the castle. This provided a high-resolution record of the earthworks in this area, showing The Knoll, a natural outcrop outside the castle gateway that may have been utilised as a barbican, and the Castle Green.

References

- Davies, W, 2006, *A report on geophysical surveys at Oystermouth Castle, Swansea, Gower* (unpublished report prepared for the Friends of Oystermouth Castle)
- Evans, E M, 1994, *Excavations at Oystermouth Castle Swansea, West Glamorgan* (GGAT unpublished report no. **1994/023**)
- RCAHMW, 2000, *An inventory of the ancient monuments in Glamorgan. Vol III part 1b: Medieval secular monuments: The later castles from 1217 to the present.* Abertyswyth
- Sell, SH, 1997, *Oystermouth Castle repair work* (GGAT unpublished report no. **1997/075**)

Nature of threat and likely extent and timing of destruction

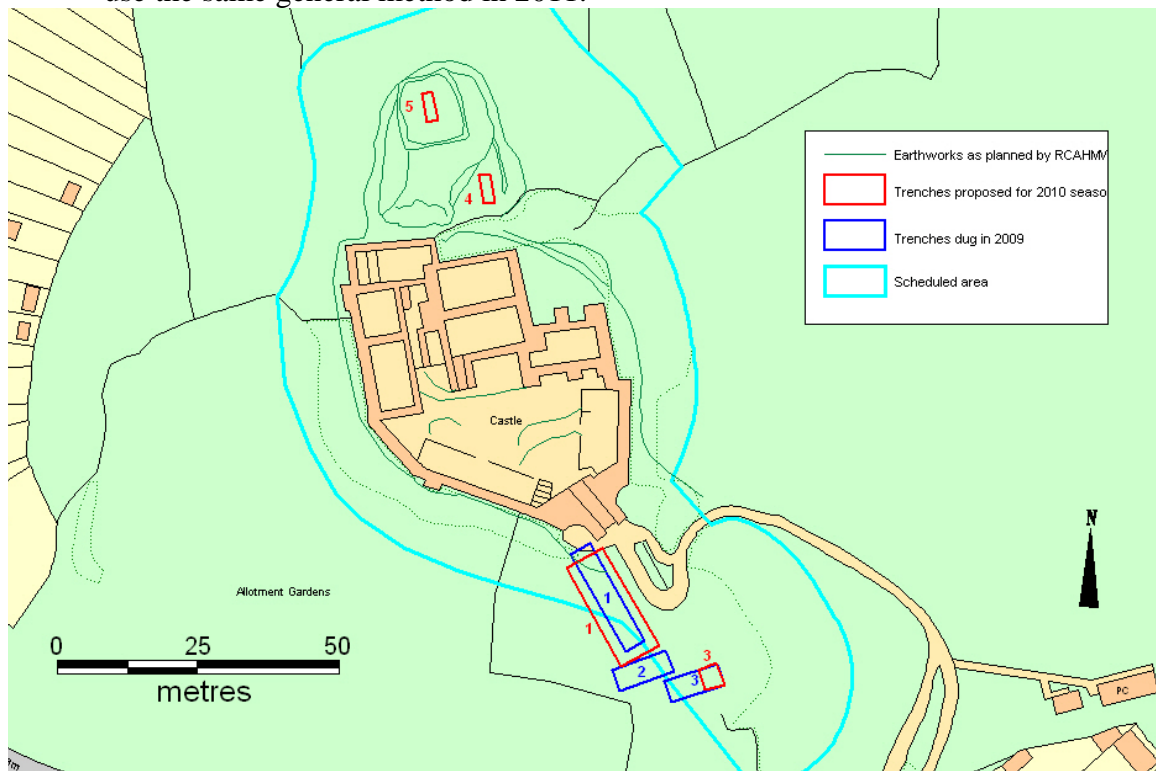
The castle is currently in urgent need of repairs. A scheme of work funded by the HLF has been agreed, and this will include the provision of a visitor centre which will be constructed in the basement of the chapel to replace the previous demountable hut. This scheme of works will take five years to complete. The repairs and new building work will be carried out by construction professionals, and it is a condition of the SMC that the archaeological work that will be required in connection with them will be carried out by professional archaeologists. Visitor services for the castle are provided by the Friends of Oystermouth Castle, a very committed and active volunteer group. Cadw and Swansea City Council are concerned that the group does not lose its cohesion during the period of the repairs.

For the 2010 programme we propose to excavate in two locations, The Knoll and the area to the north of the castle.

- The Knoll: We propose to re-open Trench 1 of the 2009 excavation season in an attempt to obtain a complete profile of the ditch. This will entail moving the trench slightly to the south, to pick up the ditch's southern lip, and widening it by an estimated 2m at either side, so that the sides can be stepped in at 1m in order to provide safe working conditions to a depth of 2-3m, which is estimated as being the likely depth of the ditch. This will enable us to establish whether the defensive capabilities of the castle were commensurate with those suggested by the massive buttressing at the base of the gate towers, or whether the latter was a cosmetic feature designed for show

rather than serious use, like the wall-walk of Swansea Castle. The eastern end of Trench 3 was not completely excavated in 2009. We therefore propose that the easternmost 4m should be re-opened if time allows, so that this end can be completely explored. However, this is considered as low priority and would only be carried out if Trenches 4 and 5 proved to be negative and could be backfilled before the end of the excavation.

- The saddle to the north of the castle. There is some dispute as to whether the earthworks planned by RCAHMW investigators represent the remains of a bailey, as they suggest (RCAHMW 2000, 247) or a quarry (Davies 2006, 2). As vegetation conditions here are likely to make excavation difficult, we suggest that excavation be limited to two small trenches, each 2m x 5m, one (Trench 4) to be situated on the higher ground north of the central block, and the other (Trench 5) in the base of the square depression that occupies most of the northern half of the northern saddle. The positions shown on the plan for Trenches 4 and 5 are indicative only, since exact placement will depend on the location of trees. This produces a greater requirement for fencing than in 2009. Following the success of the community excavation in 2010, we propose to use the same general method in 2011.



Oystermouth Castle Proposed Location of trial trenches

Objectives

Archaeological objectives 2010

- To examine the ditch outside the western gate-tower
- To examine the area to the north of the castle to determine whether the earthworks here are part of the castle design.

Outreach objectives

- To introduce students and members of the community to archaeological excavation techniques
- To provide the opportunity for members of the public to visit the excavation

□ To inform the public about the history and archaeology of Oystermouth Castle
The time-slot for the excavation has still to be finalised with Swansea City Council, which is considering how best it can be fitted in with the commencement of the programme of conservation and the construction of the new visitor centre. The two possibilities are from Monday 28th June to Friday 16th July, or for three weeks within September. Both suggested time slots are largely within term time. We therefore expect that visitors during weekdays will largely be retired and unemployed adults, and organised school parties. Weekends will provide greater opportunities for a wider range of people to visit: we therefore intend to work a seven-day week. We intend to provide wide-ranging information for members of the public and school parties who come to view the site, including site tours, exhibitions of finds and posters. The Friends of Oystermouth Castle will supply site guides.

The extent of public participation in the fieldwork will be limited by numbers of experienced archaeologists available for supervision. We aim for a ratio of no less than one supervisor to six inexperienced people on site, and one to ten with finds washing.

Subject to public consultation in the months leading up to the fieldwork, we would anticipate a limited wish to take up places for hands-on experience by the public during the week, when the students would be on site. During weekends, when the students are not on site, we would hope to be able to offer hand-on experience for a larger number of people.

In accordance with our discussions with Swansea City Council last year, we understand that the council will be playing a much larger part in the outreach programme. However, as part of the material provided for schools, it has been agreed that a student doing work experience with GGAT as part of Swansea University's American Exchange Programme is producing material on 'Life in a castle' as the special project that forms part of her internship.

Proposed work programme

Identified tasks

Archaeology

- Set up excavation, including liaison with Swansea City Council on Heath and Safety matters
- Excavation of trenches as detailed in section 5 above
- Wash finds
- Catalogue finds
- Backfill and reseed trenches
- Collate records
- Prepare interim site narrative
- Identify finds specialists
- Obtain appraisals of different classes of finds (unquantified)
- Write initial post-excavation research design

Outreach

- Contact schools and community groups*
- Prepare and produce press releases*
- Prepare and produce flyers and posters
- Provide information for daily dig diary
- Update of website on daily basis
- Produce/print activity pack for children*
- Display finds and excavation information for visitors

- Provide tours of the excavation site for visitors*
- *Swansea City Council contribution

Specialist requirements

Possible input from Cadw's environmental contract may be required during the excavation phase. Input from specialists of medieval finds will be required during the post-excavation assessment phase but is currently unquantified.

Proposed timing of work programme

Fieldwork during June and July 2010, or in September 2010. Initial post-excavation assessment to follow in third quarter.

Presentation of results

- Blog
- Public lecture
- Grey literature report
- Publication report in suitable journal
- More general article for *Gower*
- Exhibition for new visitor centre