

WNFC Field Meeting 20 July 2022 Arthur's Stone and Snodhill Castle

Thirty-two Woolhope Club members assembled in the visitors' car park set up for this year's excavation at Arthur's Stone. What followed was a day of sustained interest, with access to discoveries as they were being uncovered and thinking as it developed.

The excavations at Arthur's Stone, co-directed by Professor Julian Thomas of the University of Manchester and Professor Keith Ray (Cardiff University), continued the Beneath Hay Bluff prehistory project, whilst Tim Hoverd of Herefordshire Archaeology was again directing work at Snodhill Castle. All excavation teams were part of an archaeology field school that encompassed both excavations, staffed by professional supervisors and supported by a variety of specialists. Archaeology students from the British universities and the USA, along with experienced local volunteers, made up the workforce.

A new departure was the presence of a Community Engagement Officer, Kate Potter-Farrant, employed by the University of Manchester as a research assistant to organise outreach events and to gauge the total impact upon the local community of July's project field season. Substantial media interest had ensured that the work at Arthur's Stone was probably the highest-profile archaeological investigation in Herefordshire for several years.

Excavations at Arthur's Stone

Professor Ray explained (Fig. 1) that work at Arthur's Stone would investigate a Neolithic monument that was little understood, despite its fame. English Heritage had given permission for excavation in the Scheduled Area, and the Secretary of State for Digital Culture, Media and Sport had granted Consent for the work on the advice of Historic England professionals. This followed up on discoveries made in an adjoining field in 2021.



Figure 1. Professor Keith Ray talking about the 'passageway' at Arthur's Stone

He noted that the original monument comprised a turf mound, held in place by a fence of closely set, small wooden posts, perhaps subsequently topped with a cairn. The chamber with capstone and other stone-built features had most likely been erected later still, though apparently not all at the same time. Excavations sought to determine the order in which features were built; their relationship, orientation and possible purpose; and how much the monument had in common with Neolithic monuments elsewhere, including those previously discovered on nearby Dorstone Hill. There, mounds covered substantial buildings that had been deliberately burnt.

In a trench in the field to the south members could see some of the large post-holes (Fig. 2) that run downhill from the south-east corner of the monument, broadly in the direction of the distant Skirrid Hill near Abergavenny. It was likely that a similar row ran from the opposite side, though how far (and whether either line of posts continued past the monument) was yet to be established. An exposed stone might once have been a standing stone, potentially part of an impressive entrance approached via an avenue of large wooden posts standing in the post-holes.



Figure 2. Arthur's Stone: large postholes

Although work had barely begun in the Scheduled Area, it already appeared that the later monument, built within the area of the initial turf mound, had been surrounded by dry stone walls (Fig. 3) and that the visible chamber and so-called 'passageway' were not the only stone-built features. Also, the orientation of the chamber and the likely entrance route were different. At this early stage, the one certainty was that understanding of Arthur's Stone would soon change, probably radically!



Figure 3. Arthur's Stone: dry stone wall emerging in the Scheduled Area

Snodhill Castle

In the afternoon, the party met with Tim Hoverd, at Snodhill Castle, where work in five trenches was strengthening understanding of one of the first castles to be built in stone post-Conquest (by 1071) and its later development in the hands of the Chandos family. The tower, excavated in previous years, was believed built in c.1406 in response to the campaigns of Owain Glyndwr. Firm dates were otherwise hard to come by.

With his customary energy, Tim Hoverd pointed out that, if an uninvestigated area to the east of the keep proved to be another bailey, Snodhill would be among the largest castles in Herefordshire. Nonetheless, a history of poor building and repairs was evident. The stone keep had proved problematic from the outset whilst later difficulties might have reflected the stretched funds of the Chandos family.

In 2022 members could see that the possible chapel, uncovered in 2021, was indeed such (Fig. 4); it was not attached to the castle walls and included an apse-like structure with no apparent entrance. Storage and other features were characteristic of a free chapel. It was thought to have been in use by 1260.

In addition, new excavation had not only uncovered a previously suspected entrance from the north (Fig. 5), but also shown that a large defensive work had protected it, represented by a wall that had collapsed towards the entrance above. As often at Snodhill, the fact that stone had been sold on a massive scale in the 17th century – and found its way into many local buildings - made interpretation more difficult.

Members departed with warm thanks to Mr Hoverd, who, like Professor Ray, had brought the campaign of 2022 alive.



Figure 4. Snodhill Castle: the chapel trench. The keep in the background



Figure 5. Snodhill Castle: Mr Tim Hoverd talking to the party below the entrance on the northern side