

St Patrick's Chapel Re-visited Archaeological Dig June 2021 Virtual Summer Expedition



European funding was obtained for further excavation at Whitesands in 2021 (2020 obviously lost during the Pandemic) and because a layer of polythene had been placed in the trenches before back-filling at the end of the 2019 Dig it was possible to use a mechanical digger to quickly remove the over-burden at the start of this year's dig to allow the archaeologists (with an important band of volunteers) to make the best possible use for the 6 weeks of their digging time.

To better understand the very complex nature of the site the 12th-13th century chapel

was 'deconstructed' (with the stones carefully recorded and mapped so that it can be restored before the site is infilled). By cutting down 'through' the chapel it revealed the foundations of an earlier chapel and below the floor were burials dating 8th-11th century. Whilst the chapel had been extensively excavated during the 1924 dig it was thought they had reached the floor level but the 2021 excavations proved (by digging through the 1924 backfill) that the walls extended far further than had originally been thought.

The graves have proved predominantly Christian - aligned east/west with the head to the west (prepared for the final Judgement Day). Because of the shortage of wood in this part of Pembrokeshire (or the poor survival of wood in the very free-draining sandy soils) there is little evidence of burials in coffins instead some of the skeletons were located in cists - graves lined and capped with stone slabs. Sand is a very poor medium for digging a grave into and to support the sides of the grave-cut slabs of slate, or flat stones, were used instead and slabs were used to protect the body as the grave was re-filled. The use of cists was common across Wales in the early medieval period. Few graves had a grave-marker and the most recent excavations have highlighted the



way later burials have cut across, or through, earlier burials in a very haphazard way. From an archaeologist's perspective it is like trying to complete a 3-D jigsaw but without the picture to guide you. A centimetre of sand can accumulate in the excavations overnight so it is not surprising that the pattern of burials is complex. The upper layers had been disturbed by the 1924 dig, and represented the back-filling of their trenches, but the lower layers



would have been largely undisturbed if it had not been for the somewhat random nature of many of the burials! Because many of the grave-cuts overlap and dissect one another, and because graves have not been cut to a consistent depth it has proved very difficult to establish a clear time-line during the excavation. Discovered from their earliest dig on the site in 2014 is a solid stone wall, built from large beach boulders, which underlies even the earliest of the burials (as they are cut into the fabric of the wall which had already started to collapse and been buried by the sand).

Few artefacts were found during the excavation as Christian burials do not include grave-goods – although there seems to have been a tradition that the burials of children included white quartz pebbles placed on the top of the cists. Day 4 of the 2021 dig found a broken grave-marker, which had a cross within a lozenge shape carved in to the stone, 're-purposed' into the chapel wall though most graves do not appear to have survived with upright markers intact. They were either un-marked or the markers collapsed – unlike



one possible burial excavated in Week Four of the 2021 Dig. Whilst not strictly 'grave goods' the diggers did find a possible gaming-board, with a check pattern, apparently placed on top of one cist grave –left for the 'resident' or bored grave-diggers? As well as the bones in this season's burials a pin was found, with corroded copper alloy which may have been decorated, as well as a broken shale bracelet. This year's excavations show that there was evidence of a clay furnace beside the chapel wall – possibly used for smelting metal at some period!



Whilst sad to disturb the last resting place of real people their remains would otherwise be crushed by storm waves. Because the sand has allowed for good preservation of bone follow-up work, undertaken by the University of Sheffield, helps to reveal some of the stories of the people who worshiped at St Patrick's Chapel. *Radiocarbon-dating* and *strontium isotope analysis* date the burials from 6th to the 11th century, comprising a mixed population of men, women and children of

all ages ... and a very diverse community – such as you might expect to find where boats arrived here from all over Europe, the Mediterranean and Ireland – as well as local settlements. From studies of their bones and teeth what was found to be surprising was that the diet of the majority of the individuals was not fish-based, as might be expected of a location right on the sea!

Over 200 burials in total have been associated with the site - forming a very special group of Christians who lived and died in Pembrokeshire during the early medieval period and they will all eventually be reinterred in the Cathedral rather than being left to be washed away by the sea.

Go to the Dyfed Archaeological Trust website for the Reports from the digs from 2014, 201, 2016 and 2019 and Facebook for the 2021 information and videos.