

**Woolhope Club Field Meeting . Current archaeological excavation in the Dorstone Area : Arthur's Stone and Snodhill Castle
16 July 2021**

On Friday 16 July 16 members plus 2 guests arrived at Arthur's Stone to meet up with our leader Prof Keith Ray. He explained how large the monument would have been and that there is an alignment of barrows in this area stretching over several miles. This site is older than Woodhenge. More excavations are to be undertaken over the next few years of the Arthur's Stone site itself.



Arthur's Stone in the background as Prof Ray explains the original size of the monument



The wide view from Arthur's Stone

We were led onto the new excavation site next to the monument where Prof Julian Thomas from the University of Manchester and his students with a number of American students as well as some from Cardiff were busy excavating.



First we were shown by Dr Tom Elliot the laser which would map 330 points over the whole site (each with a mesh over the surface and then multiple scans are matched up with previous black and white markers on the site. This can also be compared to ordnance survey maps and lidar. Yellow pegs in the ground mark each square and the laser poles (see photo above)



Prof Julian Thomas explained the site and pointed out the areas of interest and the ditches around the monument.

Dr Tom Elliot and Prof Keith Ray with the laser equipment (Left)

Lunch was taken on the hill or down in the valley at Dorstone where we re-assembled to share cars for the short trip to Snodhill Castle. Here work was being carried out prior to consolidation to make the monument safe for visitors. Professor Ray introduced us to the director for Herefordshire Archaeology, Tim Hoverd, who gave us a comprehensive tour of the site, dealing, in turn, with several discrete excavations.



(Left) Tim Hoverd, Archaeological Projects Manager, Herefordshire Council and Director of the work at Snodhill, talking about the 'D' shaped north tower, Following the removal, by hand, of 84 tonnes of rubble, the basement is now exposed.

(Right) The keep at Snodhill Castle. The trench to the right has been opened to investigate the possible entrance from the inner bailey.



(Below) The outstanding view from Snodhill Castle across what was once the deer park, looking towards Vagar Hill. The stone-built pale of the park survives well for a long section following a line just below the ridge.





The keep at Snodhill Castle from below

The students here, under Covid restrictions, took a well-earned break as we visited several sites. It was now mid-afternoon and wielding their pick-axes and shovels, they looked very hot albeit proud of their fine tans. Earlier work included the clearance and consolidation of a northern mural tower, probably dating from the 13th century, which now had a concrete floor and was accessible. Work had also taken place on the motte and Tim carefully explained the complex sequence of repairs to the standing stonework of the shell-keep between c.1100 and 1300. Since the motte had been originally built for a timber structure, most of the masonry had disappeared and slipped down into the deep ditch. Sometime in the mid-17th century there had been a period of formal demolition, with stretches of walling being apportioned to individual purchasers. Tim showed us the storage area for the recycled stone down in the lower bailey.

New stone steps took us down into the upper ward, still in an elevated position, where work was just commencing on a rectangular room which projected beyond the south curtain wall, capturing long views down the Golden Valley to Peterchurch and beyond. Immediately below the room, it was suggested, there had been a string of fishponds; the centrepiece of an extensive deer park, the pale of which could just be made-out high on the escarpment to the west. It seemed that Snodhill Castle had a long and complex life in the hands of the Chandos family who eventually saw it as a recreational centre, hence the viewing room we were standing in. Further proof is provided by the 'pleasaunce' – a free-standing, and sometimes moated, banqueting hall, hidden in the undergrowth to the south-east. Similar features exist at Clun, Raglan and Kenilworth and were designed for alfresco banquets in a parkland setting.

We thanked Tim for his time and knowledge and were pleased to learn that with the promised relaxation of Covid restrictions, on Monday next, the hard working diggers were getting a day off.