



PENDINAS: SOCIAL VALUE AND PUBLIC BENEFIT

Luke Jenkins, Development Manager, and Jenna Smith, Heritage Management Archaeologist, Heneb: The Trust for Welsh Archaeology



*Pendinas Hillfort.
Credit: RCAHMW*

*Reconstruction of
Pendinas by Wessex
Archaeology
commissioned during the
project. Credit: Heneb*



Heneb: The Trust for Welsh Archaeology was formed in 2024 through the merger of the four regional Welsh Archaeological Trusts: Clwyd-Powys, Dyfed, Glamorgan-Gwent, and Gwynedd. For over 40 years, these Trusts played a crucial role in preserving Wales's archaeological heritage, and Heneb continues this legacy as an independent charity dedicated to the protection, investigation and promotion of Wales's rich historic environment.

In 2022, Heneb (formerly Dyfed Archaeological Trust), in partnership with the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales, received a £143,243 grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, with additional funding from Cadw, for a two-year community project to learn more about Pendinas Hillfort, which dominates the skyline above the village of Penparcau and the adjacent town of Aberystwyth.

The project worked with the local community under the direction of a panel of local stakeholders to discover, explore and conserve the monument for the benefit of current and future generations. Pendinas is one of the largest hillforts in Wales and the largest in Ceredigion. It is situated across two summits at the confluence of the Afon Ystwyth and Rheidol. It consists of two enclosures, joined together by a so-called 'isthmus'. The fort features massive defensive walling and ditches, along with distinctive rock-cut terraces and hut platforms along its eastern flank.

The project launched in March 2023 and included two new archaeological excavations, the first conducted on the site in 81 years. These excavations formed the centrepiece of more than 18 months of community engagement, which included



Volunteers and staff at Pendinas during the first excavation. Credit: Heneb



Excavations at the south gateway. Credit: Heneb



Site tour during the Pendinas festival. Credit: Heneb

Talk during the Pendinas festival. Credit: Heneb



Our outreach officer gives a tour with a Roman and a Celt in the background. Credit: Heneb

filmmaking, pottery making, lino printing, school projects, guided walks, storytelling, a programme of talks and tours, and two archaeology festivals to celebrate the monument. The site is also a wildlife reserve, so extensive work was undertaken throughout the project to improve the habitats found on the hillside.

The fort had previously been subject to an extensive campaign of excavations in the 1930s by Professor Darrell Ford of Aberystwyth University. Our archaeological work included geophysical survey, UAV (drone) and conventional aerial photography, and a new topographic survey. It was not possible to examine the earliest elements of the site, but radiocarbon dating indicates that the defensive system was expanded and remodelled around 400–160 cal BC. Two rock-cut platforms were also excavated, interpreted as house sites. Both were occupied around 390–170 cal BC, broadly the same period as the remodelling of the defences. Geophysical survey outside the fort detected additional lines of defence not visible on the surface and provided evidence for a more complex approach to the fort than previously appreciated.

More than 180 volunteers, ranging from 9 to 80 years old, dedicated their time to the excavations, vegetation clearance, and surveys. During the excavations, guided tours were led by Community Outreach Officer Beca Davies in both Welsh and English, with more than 1000 people visiting the site. Notably, some members of the local community who had lived in Penparcau all their lives were unaware that Pendinas was a hillfort. Speaking with members of the public, it became clear that they had a deep passion for their community. They enjoyed sharing stories they had heard or experienced in their lives, learning about Pendinas, and, in turn, teaching us about their perspectives.

The excavations provided a welcoming space where people with shared interests could come together. Regardless of personal circumstances, including struggles with mental health, the project offered a form of respite and connection. The Community Outreach Officer also delivered several talks for individuals who could not physically visit the hillfort.

We are particularly proud of the substantial involvement from the local school, Llwyn yr Eos. Pendinas is visible from the school, and while most students recognised it, they may not have fully understood its significance. Several class groups received guided tours, and we also provided activities at the school, such as pottery making and object handling, to complement the school curriculum. Projects like Pendinas bring the past to life, with students particularly enjoying learning about slingshots!

Beyond archaeology, we also focused on ecology. Local ecologist Chloe Griffiths led an ecology tour, creating the Pendinas Eco-Walk, which identified the wildlife and plants found on Pendinas. The tour was given to children at the local school, and two additional eco tours were held for adults. One of these was an accessible tour along the lower path around Pendinas. Each session had more than 50 attendees.

Another significant aspect of the ecological work was vegetation clearance. The rare acid grassland

at the top of the hillfort was being encroached upon by bracken and gorse. We worked with Ceredigion County Council, local contractors, and members of the Aberystwyth Conservation Volunteers to address this issue. Notably, volunteers moved 28 full tonne bags of gorse within four hours! This clearance helped define the banks and terraces of the hillfort, with members of the public commenting, 'This is the best Pendinas has looked in over 20 years.'

Each excavation was crowned with an archaeological festival, both held at the Hwb in Penparcau. The local MP, Ben Lake, opened the events, which were packed with activities, including guided tours, local heritage stalls, slingshot practice, face painting, reenactments featuring Iron Age villagers, Q&A sessions, and talks by archaeologists involved in the project. For many of the staff, these festivals were a highlight, providing a fantastic way to thank the volunteers and local community for their support.

Ahead of the second archaeological festival, we began working with Llwyn yr Eos to create a Pendinas mural. The children planned designs based on their experiences learning about Pendinas, its ecology and archaeology. Community Outreach Officer Beca Davies and local artist Megan Elinor Jones led a design workshop at the school, and Megan Elinor brought the designs to life on a wall of one of the school buildings – a lasting reminder of the school's involvement in the project. The mural was launched alongside a free book celebrating Pendinas and its community at the second archaeological festival.

Recently, the Pendinas Project was awarded highly commended in the engagement and participation category at the CBA Archaeological Achievement Awards. We hope to use the project as a blueprint for future community projects at Heneb, with high-quality archaeological investigations at the heart of a much wider programme of engagement, led by the community, for the community.

To find out more about Heneb and to stay up to date with their work visit www.heneb.org.uk, where you can sign up to receive a digital newsletter and access free online lectures and more.



Comisiwn Brenhinol
Henebion Cymru
Royal Commission on the Ancient
and Historical Monuments of Wales

Cadw



Luke Jenkins

Luke is the Development Manager at Heneb: The Trust for Welsh Archaeology. He is a field archaeologist who has worked across Wales on both grant-funded and development-led projects. His interests include European prehistory, the later prehistory of Wales, and community-led archaeology.



Jenna Smith

Jenna is a Heritage Management Archaeologist at Heneb: The Trust for Welsh Archaeology and serves as Co-National Lead for Outreach and Engagement. She helps maintain the Dyfed Region's Historic Environment Record, assists with heritage management projects, manages the Trust's social media profiles, and acts as the south-west Wales Portable Antiquities Scheme Officer.

