

KIDWELLY CASTLE CAR PARK EXTENSION.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT. JAN 1990.

PRN 14363

Introduction:

Trial work on the recently acquired garden south of the existing Car Park at Kidwelly castle took place between 8th and 19th January 1990. The work was commissioned by Mr R. C. Turner, Inspector, Ancient Monuments, Cadw, and was carried out by Dyfed Archaeological Trust.

In his letter of 12th January 1990 Mr Turner defined the Aims of the trial work as:

* "To assess the impact of the proposed car park and its foundations on any buried archaeological remains within what is now a garden plot".

* "To provide a background history of the former land-use of the whole area to be affected by the visitor centre and car park and comment on the potential impact of any other works being proposed."

Topography of the Area:

The medieval topography of the site is somewhat masked by post-medieval developments. As the detailed 1:200 survey commissioned by Cadw shows there is a rise in ground levels from west to east along Castle road and from south to north along Castle Street. The Castle itself is thus sited on the high point of the elevated ground on the west bank of the Gwendraeth fach above the bridging point of the river. As detailed in the archaeological report below the surface of the medieval levels in the car park extension area seems to have been truncated in the post medieval period. It is likely that the area of the existing car park south west of the Castle Gatehouse and west of the Barbican has been levelled down.

On the south eastern side of the car park extension the profile of the naturally steep slope down to the river has been affected by the line of the medieval town defences. To the east of the garden the ground falls steeply again into a deep, wide gully between its hedged boundary and the Barbican mound, (known in the nineteenth century as Bank Shobert). The section at the eastern end of Trench 1 shows the original profile of the bedrock. The ground levels at the eastern end of the garden are thus the result of accumulation of rubbish and dumping behind the medieval town walls.

History of the Area.

The whole area of the carpark and visitor centre lies within the early medieval borough of Kidwelly. This was sited within the southern of two large outer baileys which were probably constructed at the same time as the early twelfth century

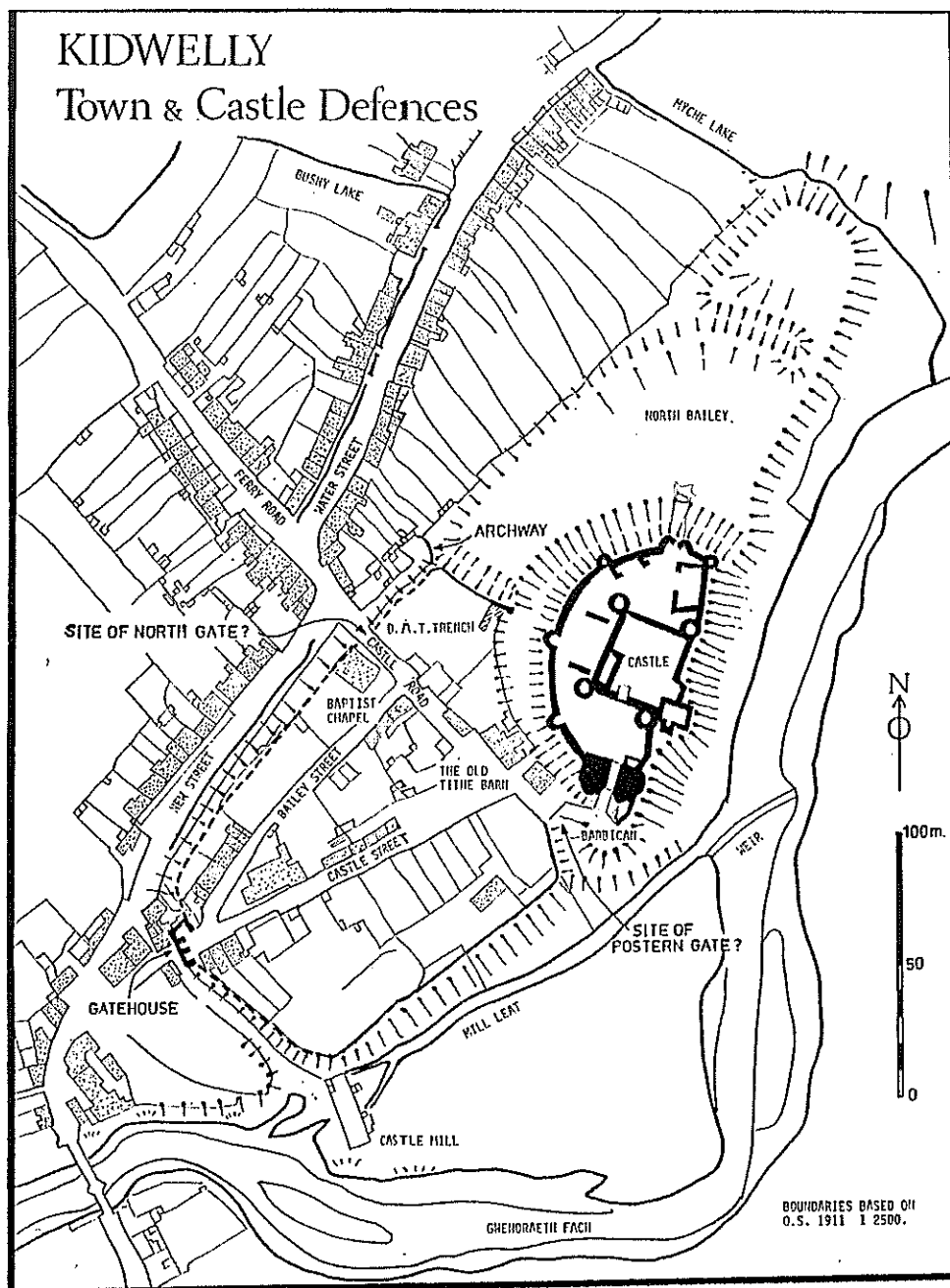


Fig. 1.

ringwork. The medieval town walls, probably in existence by 1300, were built over the earlier earth and timber defences. This was demonstrated for the short northern stretch of town wall during small scale trial work by DAT in 1980 in the former Castle Farm farmyard, when a section was cut up to the town wall. The exact location of the town wall in the vicinity of the excavations is not clear, although the hedge-bank on the south-east side of the garden plot seems a likely line for such a wall; this would place it towards the crest of a steep slope (see excavation report below).

H. James has argued for the existence of a town gate in the wide gully located between the barbican mound and the garden plot. (James, H. 'Topographical Notes on the Early Medieval Borough of Kidwelly', Carms Antiq, Vol XVI 1980) It is however not clear whether such a gate might have been situated at the top of the gully or towards the bottom. If it were at the head of the gully, the town wall would have had to swing around the north-east side of the garden plot to meet it. If the gate were located midway down, or towards the bottom of the gully, the town wall could have continued its south-west to north-east line along the south-east side of the garden plot, passed over the gate and then swung around the east side of the barbican mound.

During later middle ages urban growth was centred in the former suburbs across the river and the small walled borough declined. It is not known what structure stood on the Barbican; the construction of the Castle Gatehouse would in any case have required a fairly open area at its approaches. In the early fifteenth century, Owain Glyndwr's siege engines were assembled in what is now the car park and former Castle Farm farmyard. By the early sixteenth century there were only 3 burgages, 7 tenements and 8 cottages within the walls. The area now occupied by the Car Park and its surrounds were referred to as Castle Green in post medieval documents.

By the mid 18th century the Mansel family had built a house near the castle gate probably just south of the car park extension area of the gardens and property at the northern end and on the eastern side of today's Castle Road. This is a likely occasion for the levelling off of the garden area evidenced in excavation. In the nineteenth century a chapel - Bethesda, Welsh Wesleyan - was built hard by the Castle Gatehouse. This was demolished in 1962 to make room for the present Castle Car Park. Its foundations are likely to have caused considerable disturbance although, as suggested above, the suspicion is that the area had been already levelled off and was in any case open ground.

Archaeological Investigation:

Location of Trenches

Two hand-dug trenches were excavated. Trench 1 lay south-west to north-east across the garden plot and was approximately 9 m. long and 1 m. wide. Trench 2 was

at right angles to 1 and measured approximately 22 m. by 1 m. The drawing showing the location of the trenches is an enlargement of 1:500 plan of Kidwelly Castle and Town supplied by Cadw, as this appears to be more accurate than the 1:100 Cadw plan - drawing no AL/88003/1. All heights on the drawing supplied are in metres and calculated from the spot height of 16.047 m. shown to the south of 5 Castle Road on the 1:500 Cadw plan.

Topsoil and Subsoil

The topsoil was found to be a rich, black, garden soil, on average 0.40 m. thick. It overlay a reddish-brown subsoil. There was no intervening stratigraphy apart from layer 19 at the south-east end of Trench 2. In Trench 1 the clay subsoil sloped gently down from north-east to south-west. At the south-east end of Trench 2 it was found that the subsoil began to dive steeply down to the south-east and east, with a very shattered, decayed shale bedrock underlying the clay.

Trench 1

Numerous root-holes and animal burrows disturbed the clay subsoil in this trench. Amongst these disturbances five archaeological features were recorded. The character of the two small pits, 5 and 15, would suggest they were either the remains of small post-holes or, more probably, the result of garden cultivation; their fills were similar to topsoil. The purpose of the 0.15 m. deep rectangular pit, 2, is not known, but it did not seem to serve any structural function. Pit 23 was 0.25 m. deep. Covering the bottom and sides of this pit was a layer of coal dust, above this was a fill of sandstone blocks in a clay matrix. This feature was not a post-hole, and lacking further evidence no interpretation is offered.

Context 13 comprised a layer of crushed shale and mortar set in a shallow trench. The nature of this feature suggests it was the base of a path or the remains of poor quality building foundations. A brass button found in this layer indicates it was deposited in the 19th century or later.

Trench 2

The subsoil, where it sloped steeply down at the south-east end of this Trench, was covered by a midden deposit, 19. At the point at which it was investigated this layer was over 1m thick, and the angle of slope of the subsoil would suggest that it is considerably thicker to the south-east. It consisted of a brown clay-loam, and contained vast quantities of cockle and other sea-food shells, animal bone and 24 sherds of Medieval pottery, none of which is probably later than the 14th century. It seems likely that this midden layer was deposited up against the rear of the town wall which probably stood close to the south-east end of Trench 2.

Two small post-holes, 24 and 25, were cut into the surface of layer 19. Both of these are probably of Post-Medieval date; a fragment of a clay tobacco pipe bowl was found in 25.

The north-western half of Trench 2 was riddled with large diameter, but quite shallow, rubbish pits. Three context numbers, 20-22, were assigned to these pits, although it is clear from the plan and section that more than three pits existed. All the pits contained a similar fill - a black clay-loam containing many cockle shells and much animal bone - and the only relationship obtained was that pit 21 cut pit 20. During the excavation the lower pit deposits were waterlogged, but this was not a permanent condition as there was no surviving organic evidence. Pottery, none later than the 14th century, was recovered from these pits; 6 sherds from pit 20, 7 sherds from pit 22 and 16 sherds from pit 21.

Finds

In addition to the 53 sherds of pottery mentioned above, approximately 30 further sherds were recovered from the topsoil. Also from the topsoil were some 40 sherds of Post-Medieval pottery, some clay pipes and fragments of glass vessels. Most of this Post-Medieval material is of 19th century date, but also present are a couple of sherds of 17-18th century pottery.

Approximately 20 iron objects were recovered from various contexts. Most of these artefacts are nails, but other objects are present; without x-raying or conservation these cannot be identified.

A small bronze fitting was found in pit 21, a brass button in feature 13 and a minute whetstone in post-hole 25.

Large quantities of animal bone were recovered, particularly from pits 20-22 and layer 19.

Summary of Excavations

No definite structural remains were found. However, the implications of the distribution of rubbish pits is instructive. In other Medieval towns it has been possible to postulate the presence of buildings by the absence of rubbish pits. In the excavations in the garden plot no pit was found closer than 6 m. to the road; it is possible, therefore, that, in 14th century and earlier, buildings stood alongside the street frontage - rubbish was disposed of in gardens behind the houses. In addition to the pits 20-22, layer 19 was formed by the disposal of household rubbish in the Medieval period.

The almost complete absence of artefacts dating from the 14th to the 19th centuries perhaps reflects the fortunes of the town in this period. However, this absence coupled with the lack of stratified structural remains strongly suggests the

garden plot was levelled and material removed prior to the formation of the present topsoil.

The steep east and south-east slope to the subsoil beneath layer 19 demonstrates that the gully between the garden plot and the barbican mound was in existence in the medieval period. This strengthens the case for a gate at this point in the town wall, as this gully would have provided a convenient means of access between the town and river valley.

The Impact of Construction Work on the Archaeological Levels.

Construction of the car park will necessitate the removal of the garden soil and the top of the subsoil within the garden plot. This will expose and remove the tops of the medieval rubbish pits and midden deposit. The area immediately inside the garden wall will be machine cleared down to a level where any traces of buildings would be exposed and damaged.

It is possible that the removal of the hedge-bank around the garden plot and levelling works beneath the present visitors' centre will expose part of the medieval town wall and/or gate.

An outer revetment wall or lining to the castle ditch, discovered during Dyfed Archaeological Trust's 1980 excavation, may be revealed by demolition/rebuilding to the rear of the new visitors' centre.

Recommendations for Future Archaeological Work

The Trust recommends that a watching brief by a professional archaeologist be maintained during the period of construction, in order to record and salvage excavate any exposed and threatened deposits or features.

The Trust would be willing and able to carry out such a watching brief at a reasonable cost. There would be no need to employ a contract archaeologist on a full time basis for the duration of the contract, rather the Trust would be able to monitor the work and carry out the necessary recording as and when required.

Detailed estimates of the cost of such work could be prepared once the date, duration and order of working of the new Car park contract was agreed. A preliminary estimate of around £1000 can be provided at this stage.