

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE MEDIEVAL TOWNS OF SOUTHWEST WALES

ABERYSTWYTH

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By

K Murphy

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Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Ymddiriedolaeth Archaeolegol Dyfed Cyf
Corner House, 6 Stryd Caerfyrddin, Llandeilo,
Sir Gaerfyrddin SA19 6AE
Ffon: Ymholiadau Cyffredinol 01558 823121
Adran Rheoli Treftadaeth 01558 823131
Ebost: info@dyfedarchaeology.org.uk
Gwefan: www.archaeolegdyfed.org.uk

Dyfed Archaeological Trust Limited
Corner House, 6 Carmarthen Street, Llandeilo,
Carmarthenshire SA19 6AE
Tel: General Enquiries 01558 823121
Heritage Management Section 01558 823131
Email: info@dyfedarchaeology.org.uk
Website: www.dyfedarchaeology.org.uk

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ABERYSTWYTH

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Aberystwyth was founded in 1277. The town was laid out with a grid-pattern of streets and was provided with a stone wall for protection. A survey of 1305 records 147 burgages. This seemed to be the maximum number attained in the medieval period; in the sixteenth century there were only 60-80 inhabited houses. Other than a handful of very small investigations there has been no archaeological excavation in the town.

KEY FACTS

Status: Town charter, weekly market, two annual fairs.

Size: 147 burgages in 1307. Capacity for many more within the town walls.

Archaeology: A handful of very small investigations with poor results.

LOCATION

Aberystwyth occupies a low-lying headland on Cardigan Bay immediately to the north of the Rheidol estuary (SN 580 815), Ceredigion (Fig. 1). The Rheidol and Ystwyth valleys provide routeways to inland Ceredigion and further east. The A487 coastal road gives access to Cardigan to the south and to north Wales.

HISTORY

Aberystwyth is a planned town, created by King Edward I's charter of 1277. Initially called Llanbadarn Gaerog (fortified Llanbadarn) after the church and monastic site of Llanbadarn Fawr located 2 km to the east, it acquired its current name in the fifteenth century.

The Anglo-Normans gained a foothold in north Ceredigion in the early twelfth century and built two castles. The site of one is well-attested, the location of the second is the subject of debate. However, Edward I considered both sites unsuitable for his new castle and town; he selected a low headland immediately to the north where the River Rheidol enters the sea. Construction of town defences was rapid. By 1278 a town ditch had been created and two years later a start was made on the town walls. By 1278 a mill had been built and in 1281 a weir on the Rheidol to provide fish for the inhabitants of the new town had been constructed. Progress was not smooth; in 1282 the Welsh destroyed the castle and town walls and five years later they burnt the town.

Settlers were encouraged into the new town, and unlike Cardigan, Carmarthen and other towns to the south where Welshmen were not welcome both English and Welsh burgesses were recorded in Aberystwyth during Edward I's reign. The town defences provided physical protection for the townspeople and economic protection was provided by the granting of a weekly market, two annual fairs and other rights and privileges.

The town was not initially provided with its own church; worshippers had to walk or ride to Llanbadarn Fawr 2km distant. It was not until the mid-fifteenth century that St Mary's was built close to the castle and sea. In 1762 it was reported that coastal erosion had destroyed the church many years previously.

The population of the town in the first decades following its foundation, and indeed later in the medieval and early modern period, is difficult to assess. In 1298-1300 141½ burgages are recorded but in 1300-01 only 120 of these were occupied. A few years later in 1305 there were 147 burgages; it is not recorded how many of these were occupied.

Late medieval and early modern documents paint a picture of a town that did not achieve its full potential: in the late fifteenth/early sixteenth century vacant burgages accounted for part of the £8 8s 6d that could not be collected; in 1539 Aberystwyth was only able to muster 68 males between the ages of 16 and 68, compared with the 372 from Carmarthen and 160 from Tenby; in the 1540s the taxable wealth of the town was only 9% that of Carmarthen; and in Elizabeth I's time only 60-80 houses were inhabited.

Lewis Morris's c.1740 sketch map marks the ruins of the castle and the ruins of the church, the town walls (some sections along the sea apparently destroyed) and houses within the town walls. Although just a sketch, the map does seem to show much vacant space within the walls and no houses outside them. As late as the early-nineteenth century a little undeveloped land remained in the historic core of the town, as shown on the Llanbadarn Fawr tithe map of 1845 and John Wood's town plan of 1834 (Fig. 2).

MORPHOLOGY

Although low-lying, Aberystwyth is naturally well defended. It is bounded by the sea to the north and west and by the Rheidol estuary to the south. Flat ground to the east and northeast is now built up, but until the end of the eighteenth century parts of it would have been marsh, perhaps subject to occasional tidal inundation – Morfa Swnd lay to the north and Morfa Mawr to the east and southeast.

The town has similarities to those in North Wales founded by Edward I at the end of the thirteenth century; essentially it consisted of a grid-pattern of streets enclosed within town walls anchored by a substantial stone-built castle. Two main streets, Great Darkgate Street running roughly east/west from the castle and Bridge Street/Pier Street running roughly north/south form the main axes of the town on which the grid-pattern of streets is aligned. These two main streets were undoubtedly laid out at the town's foundation. They meet at a slightly offset, cross-roads (Figs. 2 and 3); the reason for this offset is unclear, but this may have been the site of the medieval marketplace and was thus a small open area rather than just an intersection of streets. A town hall is recorded as having stood here in the early modern period. It is unclear whether the other streets were laid out at the town's

foundation or whether they originated in more recent times, perhaps as late as the nineteenth century. Certainly, the 147 burgages recorded in 1305 could be accommodated on Great Darkgate Street, Bridge Street and Pier Street (see Fig. 8). All writers on the history of Aberystwyth note that the course of the medieval town wall is easily traceable in the modern street pattern, though there is no extant evidence for it or the town gates. The exact line of the town wall at the junction of Sea View Place and South Road was noted during the cutting of a watermain trench in the 1950s. Elsewhere its exact line is not known. On the north side of the town foundations of a thick mortared wall was noted in the 1970s during road works crossing Pier Street on a line roughly following the centre of King Street. Further to the west the wall may have been lost to the sea. Here (close to or under what is now called the Old College) St Mary's Church was destroyed by the sea. It is assumed that the church was within the town walls and so it is also assumed that the walls at this location were also destroyed. The course of the wall is shown on Figure 7.

All authorities place the town gates at the east end of Great Darkgate Street, the south end of Bridge Street and the east end of Little Darkgate Street (now Eastgate). Apart from the obvious modern name it is unclear why a gate should have stood on Little Darkgate Street quite close to the one on Great Darkgate Street. A more obvious location for a third town gate would be on Pier Street close to the sea.

BUILDINGS AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES AND MONUMENTS

Scheduled Monuments

There is one scheduled monument in Aberystwyth: Aberystwyth Castle, CD008 (Fig. 4).

Listed Buildings

There are over 170 listed buildings in the historic core of Aberystwyth. Apart from the medieval ruined castle, they mainly consist of eighteen/nineteenth century houses, commercial properties, religious buildings and street furniture. Most are listed grade II (Fig. 4).

Conservation Area

The whole of the historic core of the town lies in the Aberystwyth conservation area (Fig. 4).

Registered Parks and Gardens

There are no registered parks and gardens in the historic core of Aberystwyth.

Registered Historic Landscape

Aberystwyth is not in a registered historic landscape.

Undesignated Historic Environment Assets

There are over 170 historic environment assets recorded on the regional Historic Environment Record. Almost all of these are duplicates of listed building records (Fig. 5).

ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS

Included in this section are excavations, evaluation excavations and watching briefs. Building surveys and desk-top assessments are not included unless they add to the known archaeology (Fig. 6). There have been no substantial archaeological investigations in Aberystwyth; most have been small-scale watching briefs and evaluations.

Aberystwyth Castle. Numerous excavations have been carried out at Aberystwyth Castle over the past 130 years, the most extensive being in the 1970s and 1980s. These are not described here.

1. A post-medieval midden deposit was revealed during small-scale excavations in 1970. Reference: Thomas 1971 (7372).
2. The foundations of the medieval town wall were observed during the excavation of a watermain trench at the junction of South Road and Sea View Place. Reference: Hague 1955.
3. Nothing of archaeological significance was noted during a watching brief at Craig Goch, Sea View Place. Reference: Scott Jones 2004 (50840).
4. Nothing of archaeological significance was seen during gas main renewal in 2014. The ground through which the trench passed was heavily disturbed by other services. Reference: Enright and Murphy 2014 (107516).



Photograph of the gas main renewal trench.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL POTENTIAL

Aberystwyth has potential for addressing some of the key agenda items for research into the medieval period, including town plantation and castle building. It also has the potential to address the post-medieval research theme on settlements (towns).

There have been no significant archaeological investigations in the town, and it is therefore unknown if and where archaeological deposits survive. However, the historic core of the town is heavily built-up thus opportunities for archaeological investigation are limited. There are some key issues that need addressing:

What was the exact course of the medieval town wall and where were the town gates?

What was the extent and character of the built-up part of the town in the medieval period?

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Databases and online references

Dyfed Historic Environment Record <https://www.archwilio.org.uk/arch/>

Cof Cymru <https://cadw.gov.wales/advice-support/cof-cymru>

LiDAR <https://lle.gov.wales/catalogue/item/LidarCompositeDataset/?lang=en>

Research framework for the Archaeology of Wales

<https://www.archaeoleg.org.uk/areasouthwest.html>



Figure 1. Location map.



Figure 2. Extract from John Wood's town plan of 1834.

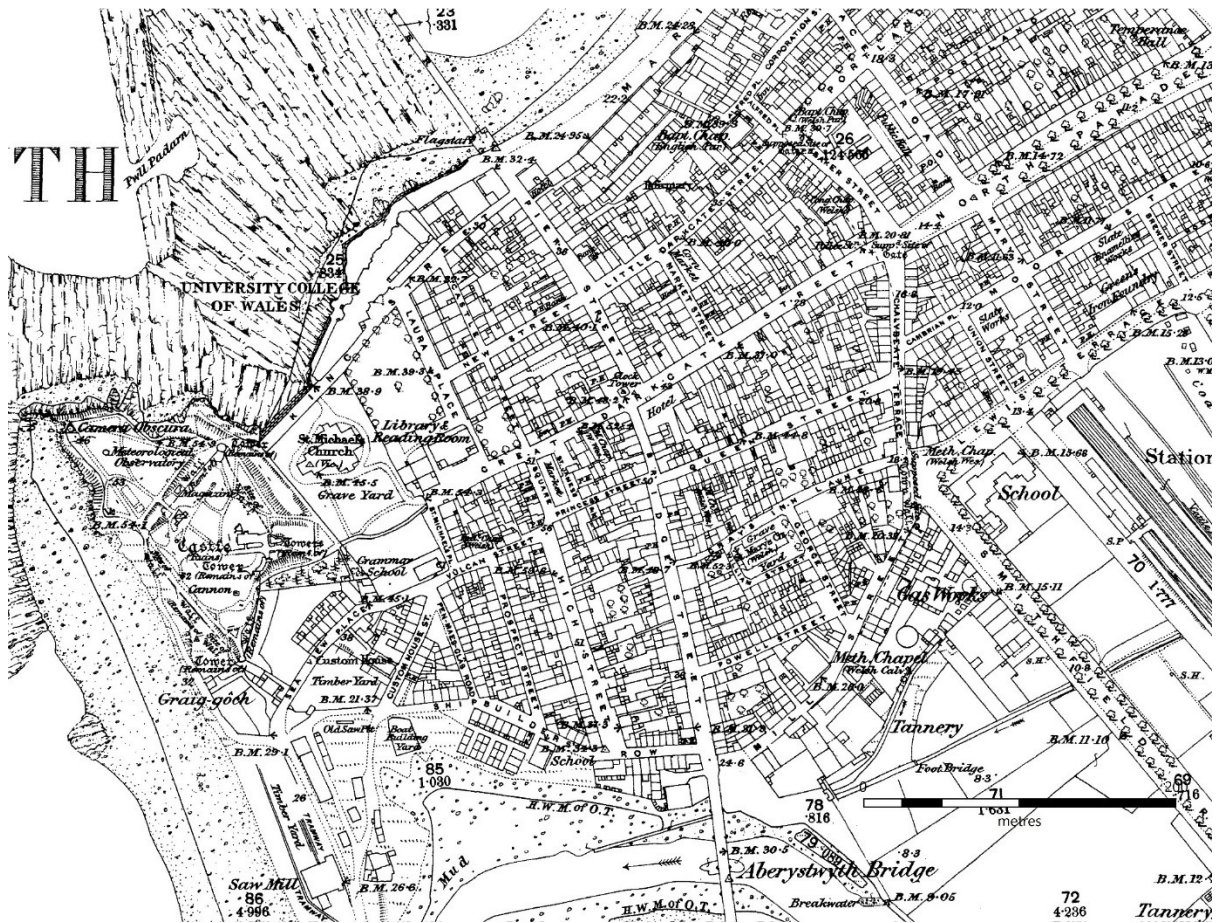


Figure 3. Extract from the 1889 Ordnance Survey 1:2500 map (Cardiganshire 06.09).



Figure 4. *Listed buildings (blue circles), scheduled monuments (outlined in red) and the conservation area (outlined in purple).*



Figure 5. Sites recorded on the Historic Environment Record.



Figure 6. Location of archaeological interventions.



Figure 7. The course of the medieval town wall and locations of gates against a modern map background. The course of the wall is evident in the modern street layout on the south and east side of the town; the course to the north is more conjectural and here it may have been lost to the sea.

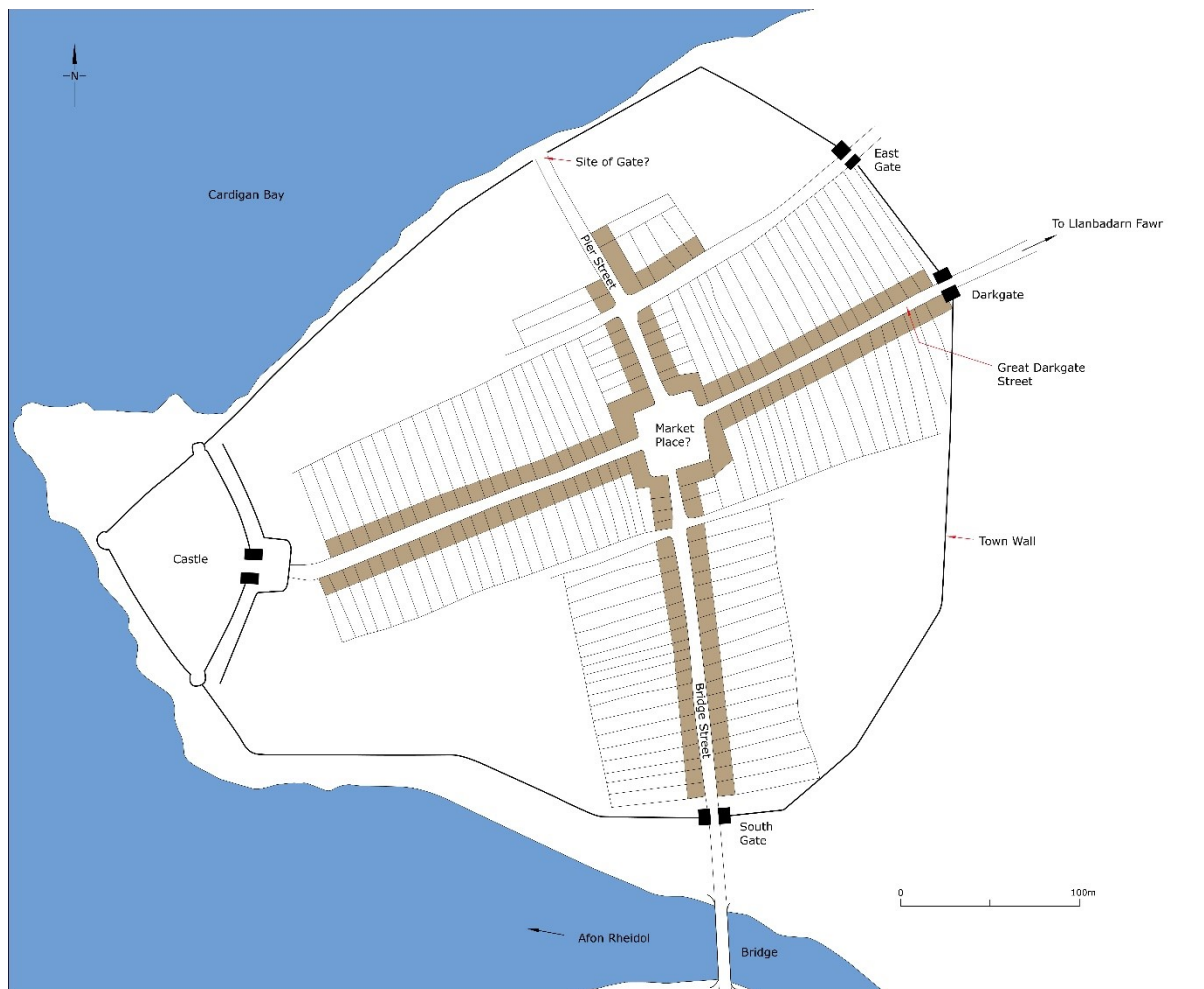


Figure 8. Conjectural plan of Aberystwyth in c.1320.