

# THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE MEDIEVAL TOWNS OF SOUTHWEST WALES

## CARDIGAN



*1999 aerial photograph of Cardigan (DAT 995022-1)*

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By

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# **CARDIGAN**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

In the early twelfth century the Anglo-Normans established a castle at Cardigan outside the gates of which a settlement rapidly developed. The Welsh attacked the castle and town on numerous occasions, most famously in 1136. However, the town thrived and 110 burgesses lived within the walled town of Cardigan in 1268. The town declined in the late thirteenth century and did not recover until the post-medieval period. Stratified archaeological deposits from the medieval period and later have been recorded in several small-scale archaeological investigations in the town, but there have been no substantial excavations.

## **KEY FACTS**

Status: Borough. 1284 town charter. Weekly market and annual fair.

Size: 1268 130 burgages.

Archaeology: Medieval deposits have been recorded in several small-scale interventions.

## **LOCATION**

Cardigan lies on the southern boundary of Ceredigion on the lowest bridging point of the River Teifi, approximately 3km from the open sea (SN 178 461). Good communication routes are provided along the Teifi valley to the east, to the north into the coastal areas of Ceredigion and to the south to Haverfordwest and Fishguard.

## **HISTORY**

In 1093 Roger of Montgomery invaded Ceredigion and established a castle on the Teifi estuary. The exact location of his castle is uncertain but many writers have identified the earthworks at Old Castle Farm 1km downstream of Cardigan with Roger's castle. While this is possible, it is equally possible that Roger's castle was on the site of the current Cardigan Castle. His castle was abandoned following his death in 1094. In about 1110 Gilbert fitz Richard reconquered Ceredigion and built a castle at Cardigan. Within a few years a settlement developed and a church founded – the beginnings of Cardigan town. The Welsh, disposed of their lands, fought back and attacked the castle and town on several occasions. The attack of 1136 was particularly bloody, with men, women and children of the town slaughtered. The castle did not fall. Contemporary records reveal the presence of a bridge at this date. In 1165 Rhys ap Gruffudd captured Cardigan making it a Welsh community. Ralph Griffiths has noted how rare this was as the Welsh were not urban dwellers. In the later twelfth century and early thirteenth century

Cardigan oscillated between Welsh and English control until 1241 when it came under direct English royal control.

Gilbert fitz Richard founded a Benedictine Priory with the associated church of St Mary at Cardigan in about 1115 on land to the east of the castle. It was dissolved in 1538. Cardigan was provided with a second church, Holy Trinity, the location of which has been much debated as nothing of it now survives, with many authorities placing it outside the town. However, Seamus Cunnane makes a convincing case for it to be located on the market place within the town. A hospital, known as Maudlyns Hospice, was recorded on St Mary's Street; it was abolished in 1536.

Edward I granted a town charter to Cardigan in 1284 which reiterated the right to hold a market and fair. Cardigan's grant of murage, that is the right to protect the town with walls, dates to 1281. However, the town was certainly defended by this date and so this grant would have been to extend existing defences or translate pre-existing earth and timber defences to stone. Edward's intention was that these two grants would encourage immigrants to the town and spur growth.

Our knowledge of the extent of Cardigan comes from two surveys, 1268 and 1301. The 1302 survey being the most detailed.

In 1268 130 burgages were recorded with 15 of them lying outside East (or Wolf) Gate, between the gate and the priory, three outside Bridge Gate and four in Fenny Street, a low lying area to the east outside town defences. Burgesses numbered about 110, with several individuals having acquired several burgages: Walter Blakeney had five and a half and John the Welshman had four and a half.

By 1301 about the same number of burgages and burgesses were recorded as in 1268, but some changes in the layout of the town had taken place with ten fewer burgages within the town walls. Several burgesses held more than one burgage, with Walter Blakeney, later Constable of Cardigan Castle, holding a block of nine on High Street paying 8d extra for '*pro duobus capitibus domus sue*' which probably translates as a house with two turrets. Some parts of the town contained vacant plots as a few years earlier, in 1298-1300, sixty-eight burgages were recorded empty.

In common with other towns the plague of 1348-9 would have had a devastating impact on the town. Cardigan slowly declined. During the fifteenth century the number of burgages available for rent had decreased or were recorded as vacant and decayed.

John Speed's 1610 map (Fig. 2) shows about 110-120 houses within the walled town. None are shown on Chancery Lane/Souters Street and several on the west side of High Street at the northern end are shown ruinous. Over a hundred houses lie along several streets between the East Gate and St Mary's Church, and about ten houses lie outside

the North Gate. Overall Speed's map shows a well-populated town, albeit with some pockets of vacant plots; this is difficult to reconcile with a later seventeenth century account which reports Cardigan 'enhabited the number of fyti and five households and as many and more decaye and late habitations'.

## **MORPHOLOGY**

Seamus Cunnane has published a detailed account of the topography of Cardigan; this summary draws on his work.

Cardigan Castle dominates the south end of the town, although much of what is visible from the outside is the result of nineteenth century rebuilding. Despite recent archaeological investigations during recent restoration works there are many unresolved issues with the castle – the main gate is assumed to be on the northwest side; what was the status of the open area between the Castle and St Mary's Street? Could the earliest settlement which developed soon after 1110 have been here?

We know that when the Welsh attacked in 1136 the castle was firmly established, a town had developed, there was a bridge over the Teifi (perhaps upstream of its present location) and the priory was probably in existence as was Holy Trinity Church. It is also likely that the town was defended. Building plots to the west and northwest of the castle are irregular and small, the result of unplanned, organic development in the early twelfth century and contrast with the more regular burgage plots to the north along High Street and to the west along Quay Street - these were planned and laid out later in the twelfth century or during the thirteenth century. Figure 7 is a conjectural plan of the extent of the town on the eve of the 1136 attack.

Analysis of the 1268 and 1301 surveys provides a clearer picture of the topography of the town. Figure 8 shows the layout of the town at its maximum extent in the medieval period, around about 1320. By this time the town wall and gates had been in place for several decades. These were to some extent dictated by topography; they survive particularly well to the east where they are designated a scheduled monument and elsewhere their course has been fossilised in property boundaries and can be traced with a high degree of confidence. The location of the town gates has been established, although nothing now survives of them above ground. It is not always possible to reconcile the number of burgages recorded in medieval surveys with the topography. The burgage plots shown on Figure 8 broadly follow property boundaries recorded on large scale Ordnance Survey maps (Fig. 3). Holy Trinity Church probably lay close to the High Cross and marketplace – there are reports of burials being found in this area. Apart from burgages on St Mary's Street towards the priory and few more outside Bridge Gate and in Fenny Street the whole of the population of Cardigan lived in houses within the

town walls. Given that the town suffered depopulation from the 1340s it is likely that areas within the town walls remained deserted throughout the later medieval period. However, at least by the early seventeenth century possibly earlier, houses had been constructed outside the walled town to the east, towards the priory/St Mary's Church. Since then the town has expanded to the west, north and east and across the river to the south.

## **BUILDINGS AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES AND MONUMENTS**

### **Scheduled Monuments**

There are three scheduled monument in Cardigan: the castle, CD123; two sections of the medieval town wall on the east side of the town, CD141; and Cardigan Bridge, CD003 (Fig. 4).

### **Listed Buildings**

There are approximately 73 listed buildings in the historic core of Cardigan (Fig. 4). Most are domestic and commercial buildings listed grade II. Cardigan Castle is listed grade I, and there are several buildings listed grade II\*.

### **Conservation Area**

The whole of the historic core of the town lies in the Cardigan Conservation Area (Fig. 4).

### **Registered Parks and Gardens**

The castle grounds are a registered historic park and garden (Fig. 4).

### **Registered Historic Landscape**

Cardigan lies in the Lower Teifi Valley registered historic landscape, in the Cardigan historic landscape character area.

### **Undesignated Historic Environment Assets**

There are approximately 95 undesignated assets in Cardigan listed on the Dyfed Historic Environment Record. (Fig. 5). These include duplicates of the c.73 listed buildings. Other records are of unlisted buildings and structures and other assets, such as the locations of the medieval town gates.

## **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 several excavations in Cardigan Castle, most notable during a major period of restoration 2012-15. These works were not concerned with the town and so are not reported on here.

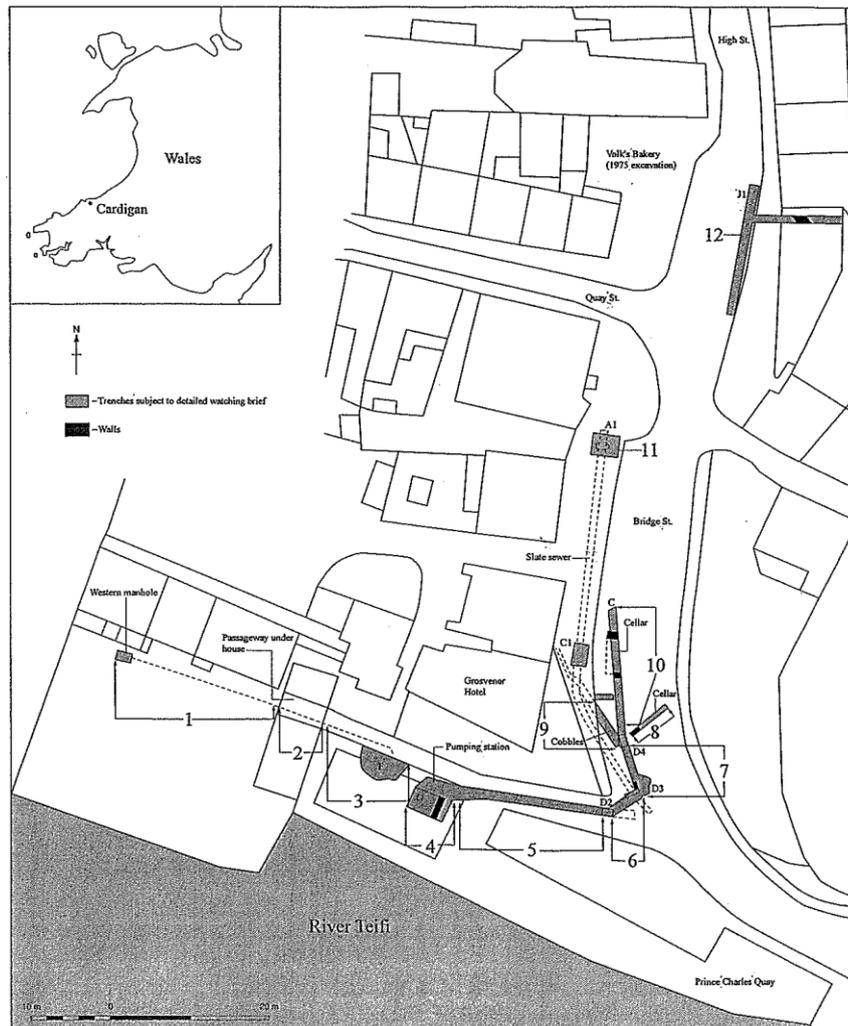
Numbers in parentheses below refer to records in the Dyfed Historic Environment Record.

1. A small-scale evaluation in 1978 prior to construction of a new shop and a subsequent watching brief during construction revealed a section of the medieval town wall along the eastern edge of the site. A 90 degree turn in the wall indicated the location of a tower projecting from the wall. Stratified medieval deposits butted against the wall. It appeared that the remainder of the site had been lower earlier in the twentieth century; no medieval archaeological deposits survived. Reference: James 1983 (100607).
2. A salvage excavation during demolition of 1 and 2 High Street in 1975 revealed a hollow and pit filled with strata, including organic layers and charcoal-rich layers, associated with medieval pottery. It was not possible to characterise the remains more fully in the limited space and time available. Reference: Maynard 1975 (45563).
3. A small-scale excavation in 2003 at two cottages, 1 and 2 Green Villas, revealed buried masonry associated with the castle, possibly part of the gatehouse. Yard surfaces and other features associated with the nineteenth-century were also recorded. An assemblage of medieval and later pottery was found during the excavation. Reference: Jamieson 2003 (49166).



*The medieval masonry uncovered at 1 and 2 Green Villas.*

4. A watching brief during sewer-pipe replacement in and around Bridge Street in 2000-01 revealed foundations of buildings, earlier road surfaces and other features. An island of buildings occupied the centre of Bridge Street until demolished in the nineteenth century and it was these that were cut through by the sewer pipe trench. The trench also cut through the location of the medieval Teifi Gate, but no evidence for this was seen. Archaeological features were over a metre below current road surfaces. Reference: Crane 2001 (42464).



*The location of the 2000-01 sewer pipe replacement watching brief.*

5. An evaluation on a vacant plot, former burgage plots, between Quay Street and Market Lane revealed medieval features, a hollow that had gradually been infilled between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries and foundations of buildings demolished in the 1850s. In 2020 an excavation was undertaken – the results of this are awaited. Reference: Landsker Archaeology Ltd 2009 (102825).



*The Quay Street/Market Lane evaluation showing the depth of archaeological deposits.*

6. Building recording and a watching brief during renovation and construction of a small extension at 8 St Mary Street revealed deeply stratified archaeological deposits of earlier buildings spanning several centuries, although it was not possible to characterise the remains in the small area available for investigation. Reference: Taylor, Harris and Milford 2008 (63011).



*General view of the work at 8 St Mary's Street.*

7. Modern deposits overlaying natural sands and gravels were noted in watching brief during construction of two houses to the rear of 9-10 High Street. Nothing of archaeological significance was noted, although some groundworks had taken place prior to the watching brief. Reference: Crane 2007 (63513).



*General view of the work at 9-10 High Street.*

8. A watching brief on the laying of new services in Eben's Lane revealed that previous trenches had disturbed the ground – nothing of archaeological interest was noted. Reference: Hancox and Priestley 2005 (54444).
9. A watching brief on new drainage works at St Mary's Church revealed burials of post-medieval date. Nothing earlier was noted in the shallow trench. Reference: Day 2016 (109383).



*The drainage work at St Mary's Church.*

## **ARCHAEOLOGICAL POTENTIAL**

Cardigan has high potential for addressing some of the key agenda items for research into the medieval period, including Norman expansion into southwest Wales (town plantation, castle building and church building) and Welsh resistance and adaptation. It also has the potential to address the post-medieval research theme on settlements (towns).

Archaeological investigations in Cardigan have mostly been limited to watching briefs during small-scale construction projects. Despite their size these have demonstrated that deeply stratified archaeological deposits are present across most of the town.

There are issues to be addressed: what was the location and nature of the early eleventh-century town? what survives below ground of the medieval town gates? are there waterlogged deposits associated with quays? where exactly was Holy Trinity Church and what survives of it?

Buildings, many of them listed, present almost unbroken street frontages within the historic core of the town and thus opportunities for archaeological investigations in key areas are severely limited. However, even the limited amount of archaeological investigation carried out to date has shown that medieval deposits survive beneath later buildings. There are also some open areas in the town that are likely to contain undisturbed medieval deposits.

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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>
- Coflein <https://coflein.gov.uk/en>
- 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.

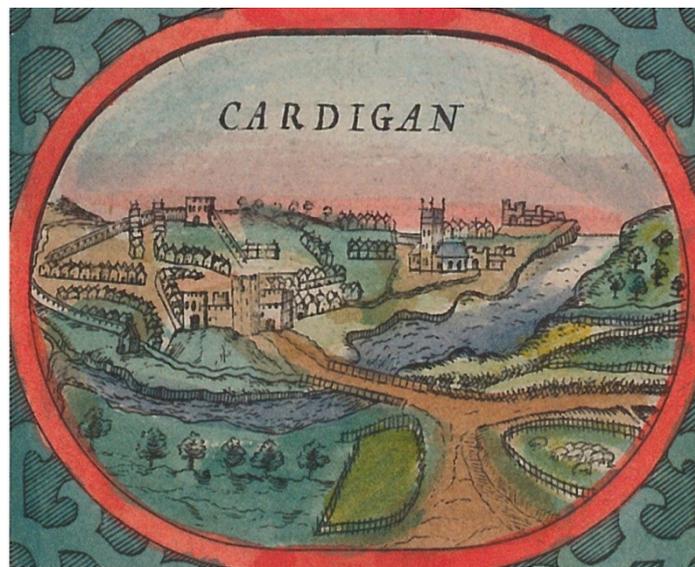
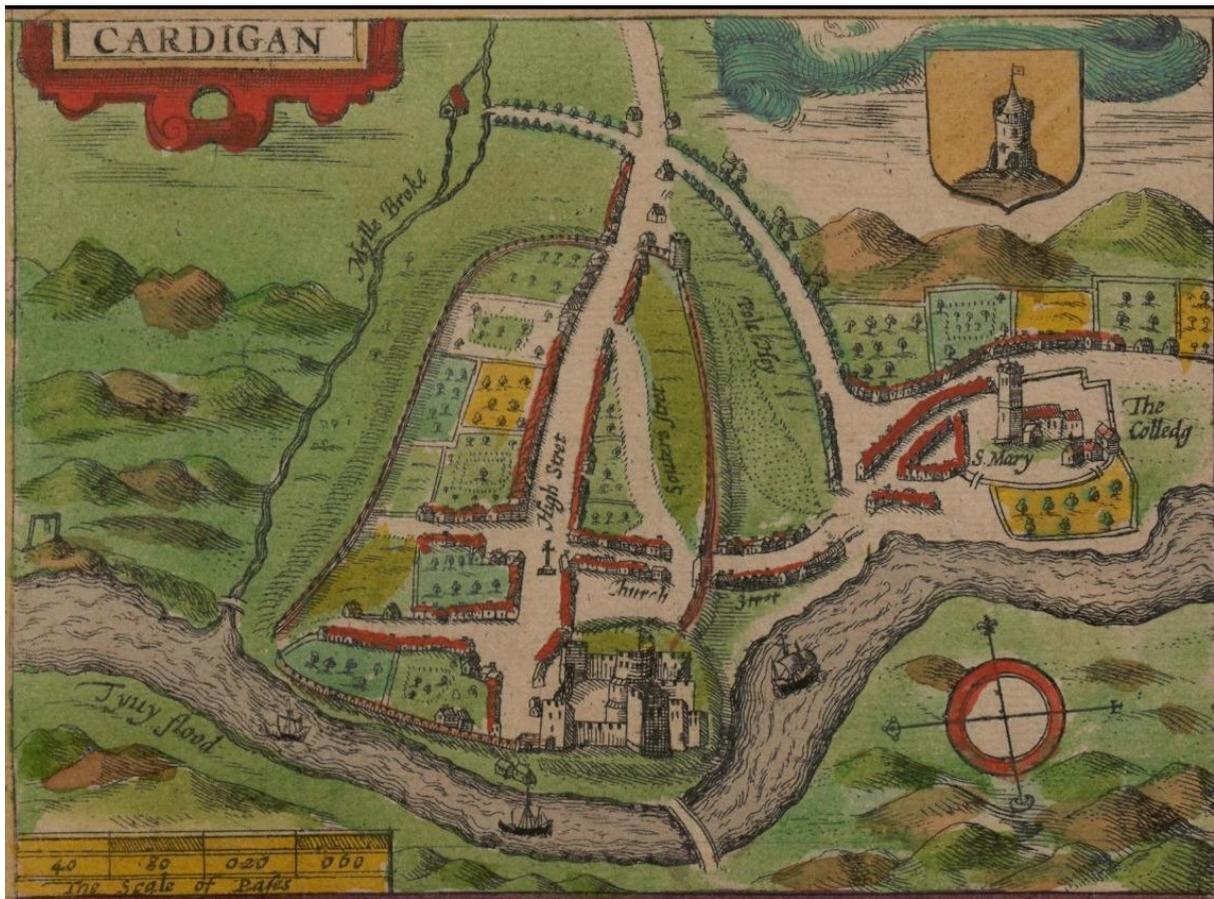


Figure 2. John Speed's 1610 map and bird's eye view of Cardigan.

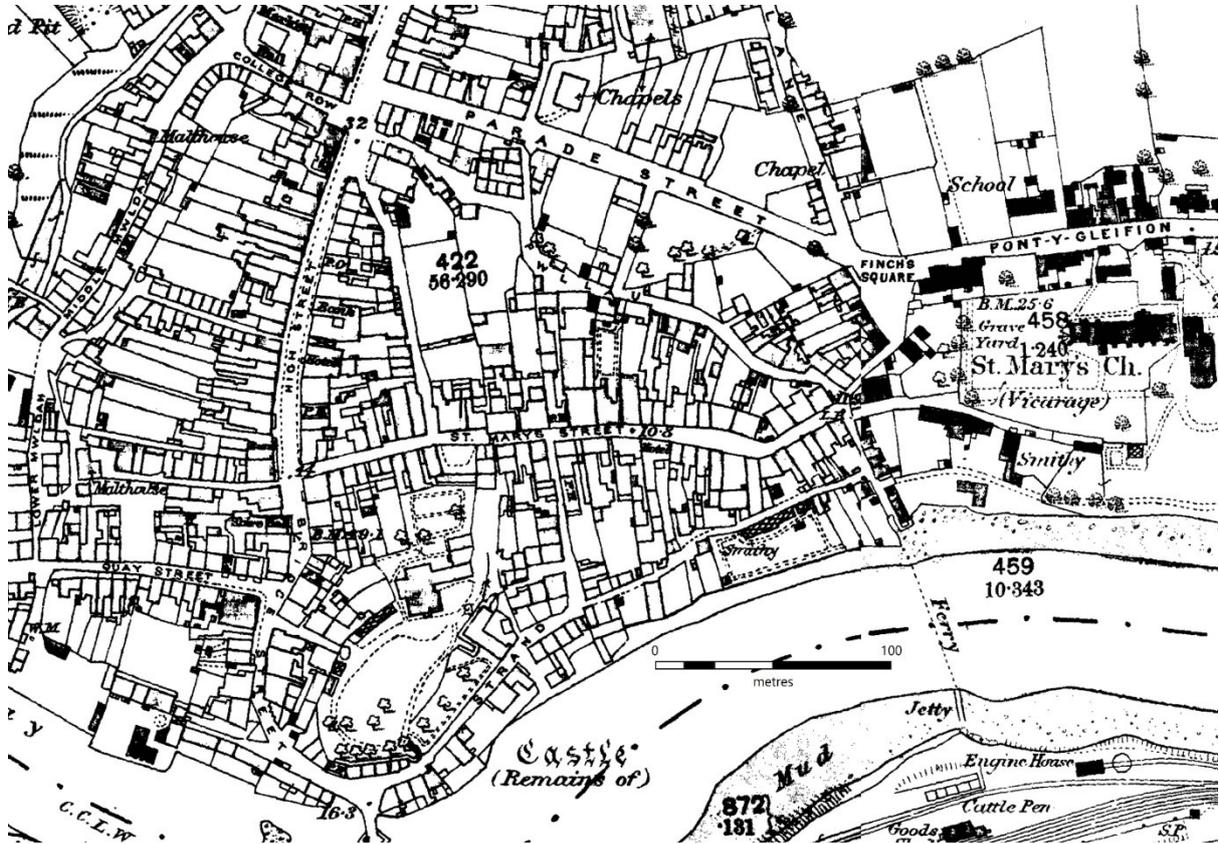


Figure 3. Extract from the 1890 Ordnance Survey 1:2500 1<sup>st</sup> Edition map (Cardiganshire 38.05).

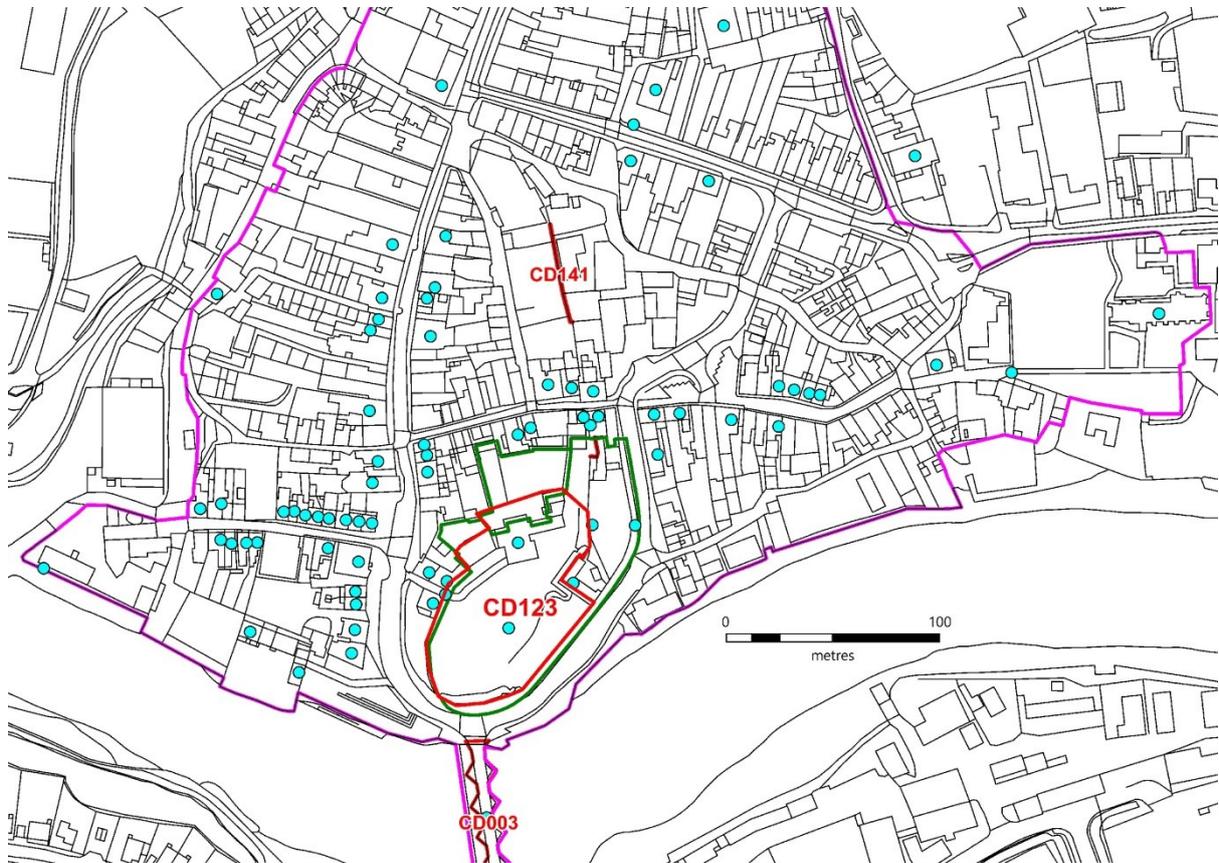


Figure 4. Listed buildings (blue circles, scheduled monument (red), the conservation area (outlined in purple) and the registered park and garden (outlined in green).



Figure 5. HER records.

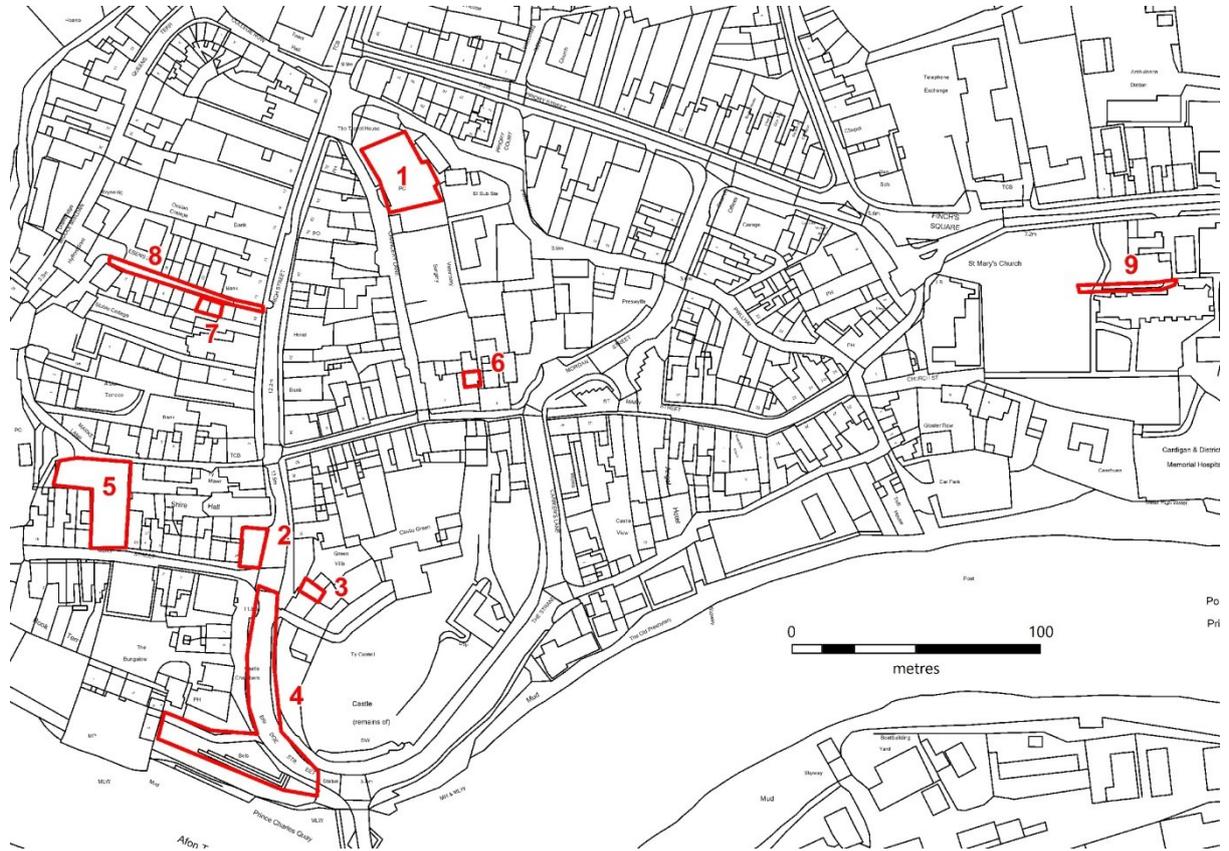


Figure 6. Location of archaeological interventions.

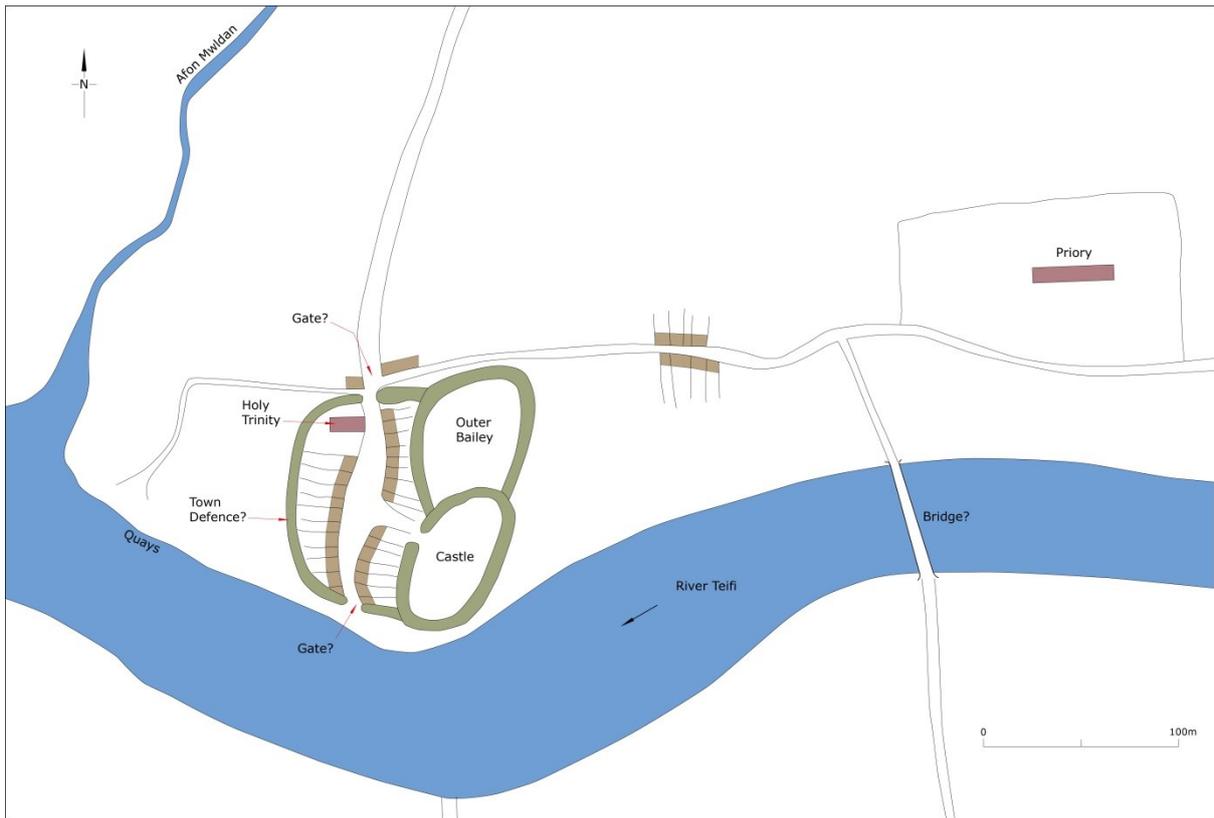


Figure 7. Map showing Cardigan as it may have been in 1136.

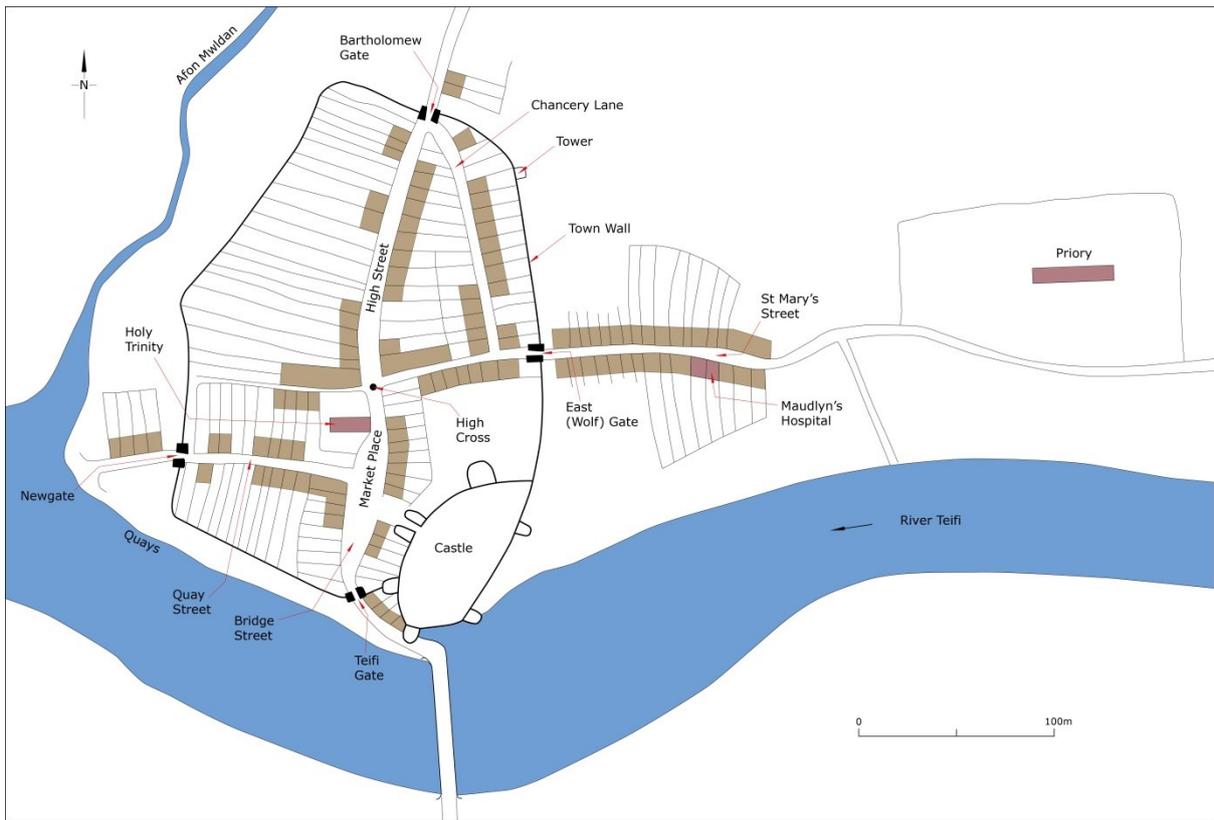


Figure 8. Map showing Cardigan as it may have been in c.1320. Note some of absence of houses in some of the burgages.