

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE MEDIEVAL TOWNS OF SOUTHWEST WALES

DINEFWR AND NEWTOWN



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By

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DINEFWR AND NEWTOWN

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A settlement developed outside the gates of Dinefwr Castle in the late twelfth century. It remained small, devoted to serving the Welsh court at the castle. Soon after 1280 when the castle came into English hands a weekly market and annual fair were granted to the 'town of Dinefwr'. However, a new town (Newtown) was founded soon after 1280 some distance away from the castle on land now occupied by the National Trust property called Newton House. By the end of the medieval period both towns were deserted. Earthworks mark the location of the town of Dinefwr and archaeological investigations have detected the remains of Newtown.

KEY FACTS

Status: Borough. 1363 town charter. Weekly market and annual fair.

Size: 1302-3 Dinefwr 13 burgages and Newtown 35 burgages.

Archaeology: Excavation and survey have revealed the remains of Newton.

LOCATION

The twin towns Dinefwr/Newtown lie in Dinefwr Park approximately 1.5km west of Llandeilo in the Towy valley Carmarthenshire (Figs. 1-3). The town of Dinefwr lay close to Dinefwr Castle (SN 6123 2169) in a dominant location on the crest of a steep slope. Deciduous woodland covers the site. Newtown (Y Drenewydd) lay in a more sheltered location on level ground 700m to the north (SN 61472245) under what is now Newton House (formerly called Dynevor Castle) and surrounding outbuildings, gardens and parkland.

HISTORY

The following history is gleaned from Griffiths (1991) supplemented by Lewis (1911), Colvin and Moggridge (2003) and Soulsby and Jones (1977).

Rhys ap Gruffydd founded Dinefwr Castle soon after he came into possession of Cantref Mawr in 1163, although what survives of the masonry castle belongs to later centuries. The castle remained (largely) in Welsh hands until 1280 when it passed into the possession of the English Crown and later to individuals loyal to the English Crown. The castle seems to have been maintained throughout the fourteenth century but, as military needs receded during the fifteenth century, the castle passed into the hands of the Standish family. They were essentially absentee landlords, and the castle fell into decline.

In common with other similar sites in Wales, a settlement would probably have developed around the gates of the castle. At Dinefwr in 1280 Edward I's surveyors recorded a villa de Scleygon - 'vill of the Clerks', later in 1318 called 'Trefscleygyon'. Griffiths suggests this was a settlement of priests attached to the court of Dinefwr, possibly located close to the castle or even in its outer bailey. Up to 1280 it would seem that the 'vill of the Clerks' could hardly be graced by the term town. However, soon after the castle came into English hands in 1280 the Justiciar of West Wales proclaimed a weekly market and annual fair at 'the town of Dinefwr'. Development was rapid, for by 1298 the town contained 26 burgages and a court to dispense justice. However, it is argued below that not all of these burgages were located close to the castle.

Although it is likely that the old town of Dinefwr lay close to the castle, the presence of three properties recorded 'near Llandavyson' in 1532 raises the possibility that the town was perhaps spread over a wide area, with houses close to Llandyfeisant Church 1km to the east.

It is likely that events of around 1280 allowed for the augmentation of the existing population by immigrants and for the reordering of the settlement, eventually leading to a 'twin-town' settlement with Dinefwr becoming the 'old town' and the new town (Newtown) located on the site of the present Newton House. This reordering did not happen immediately, as in 1300 it is recorded of Newtown: 'Of this town nothing for the burgages and lands, because they are not yet arrented'. It seems likely, therefore, that 26 burgages recorded in 1298 consisted of a combination of rented burgages in the old town of Dinefwr and freshly laid but unoccupied burgages ready for settlers in the new town, as in 1302-03 it is noted that the old (or upper) town of Dinefwr consisted of just 13 burgages and the new (or lower) town of Newtown had 35.

The tenants of the old town were Welsh; the new town was of immigrant origin, apart from one Welsh tenant. Clearly the English Crown was both securing its hold on south Wales by promoting immigration and maximising its profits by encouraging tenants to settle in a new town away from the cramped and rather inconvenient quarters around the castle.

Surprisingly both settlements survived the population crash and economic downturn of the mid-fourteenth century following the ravages of the plague during 1340s. In 1360 the rent of the old town was 25s 4d, whilst in the more populous new town at least 46 burgesses paid a shilling each in rent with non-burgesses paying 10s 6d. The granting of a charter in 1363 strengthened the position of the town. Privileges in the charter were extended in a second charter of 1392.

However, it was mainly the privileges and rights of the 'English' burgesses that were strengthened, as the charters enabled them to monopolise commercial and administrative affairs and gave them some legal immunity: they could not be fined by Welshmen in the Royal courts of Cardiganshire and Carmarthenshire. The charters mark the high point of the town for in 1394-5 the rental of the old town remained at 25s 4d but the number of burgages in the new town had fallen slightly to 40. The charters, though marking the high point for the new town, spelled the death knell for the old Welsh town around the castle, although the date of its abandonment is not known. Even the more successful new town seems to have succumbed to competition from the more advantageously located Llandeilo Fawr, for in the mid-1530s it was described by John Leland as 'sumtime a long streat nowe ruinus'.

In 1532 Rhys ap Thomas built the 'Mansion of Newton' which 'stendeth within the town of Newton'. The mansion was described as having eight chambers with a slate-roofed hall paved with Flanders tiles plus numerous outbuildings. It is assumed that mansion was built in the decaying town as described by Leland. Sources indicate the original mansion was replaced by a new building between 1595 and 1603. This in turn was replaced by the current building in c.1660. In 1804 Richard Fenton recorded: 'Behind the House to the West was the town called Trenewydd (Newtown) – and indeed the daily appearance of fragments of buildings as dug up in almost every part confirms it.' Work by the National Trust in the formal garden to the rear of the house revealed foundations of a substantial structure. Old foundations were also recorded during construction of Nissen huts during WW2 to the southeast of Newton House.

Formal gardens had been laid out around the house by 1700; these were swept away and replaced by a 'naturalistic' landscape between 1750 and 1780. In 1856-59 the house was again surrounded by formal gardens, this time enclosed by a substantial stone-built ha-ha

MORPHOLOGY

Due to the dense deciduous woodland detailing the precise location of the town of Dinefwr, the old town, is problematic. Low earthwork banks running off at right angles on either side of the track that leads east from the castle, visible on the ground and recorded during a topographical survey (see below) but better defined on LiDAR imagery, are old boundaries, probably defining burgages. About 10-15 burgages seem to be present on each side of the track. A terrace to the north of the castle and at a lower level may also have accommodated houses. Archaeological test pitting in both of the above areas failed to reveal evidence of medieval or later occupation.

There is no surface evidence for Newtown but documentary sources and archaeological evidence place it under and around the present Newton House, the formal gardens, courtyards, visitor car parks and adjoining parkland. Paintings of c.1700 hanging in Newton House show what appear to be hedged burgages surviving behind (to the west) of the house beyond formal gardens. Geophysical survey followed by small-scale archaeological excavation in parkland to the west, east and north of the house detected evidence for the medieval town and the formal gardens shown in the paintings, but it seems likely that most of the town lies beneath Newton House itself and associated buildings and gardens.

There is no evidence to indicate that Dinefwr or Newtown was ever defended.



Newton House from the north c.1700 showing, on the right, possible remnant burgage plots (courtesy of the National Trust).

BUILDINGS AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES AND MONUMENTS

Scheduled Monuments

There is one scheduled monument in the area: Old Dynefwr Castle (CM029). The area of this scheduled monument encompasses the castle and part of the western area of the medieval town of Dinefwr (Fig. 3).

Listed Buildings

There are ten listed buildings in the areas of the old towns of Dinefwr and Newtown. The medieval Dinefwr Castle is listed grade I. Seven buildings around Newton House, including the house itself, are a mixture of grade II and II*. Two detached estate buildings are listed grade II (Fig. 3).

Conservation Area

The whole of the areas of the old towns of Dinefwr and Newtown lie within the Llandeilo conservation area.

Registered Parks and Gardens

The whole of the areas of the old towns of Dinefwr and Newtown lie within the Plas Dinefwr registered park and garden, grade I.

Registered Historic Landscape

Dinefwr lies in the Towy Valley registered historic landscape. It has been characterised in the Dinefwr Park character area.

Undesignated Historic Environment Assets

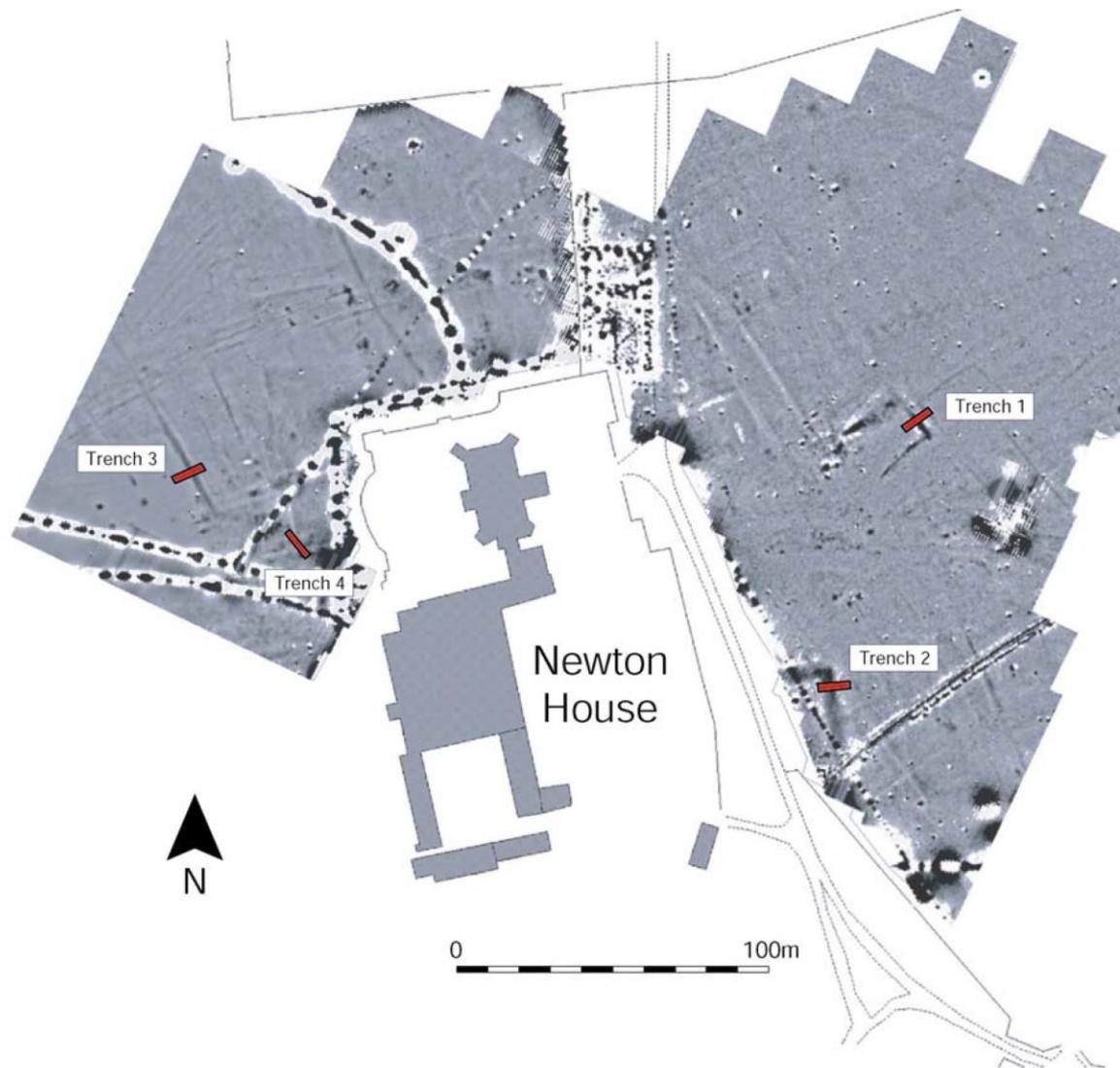
There are approximately 20 sites and monuments on the Regional Historic Environment Record. However, many of these are duplicate records of listed buildings (Fig. 4).

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.

Numbers in parentheses below refer to records in the Dyfed Historic Environment Record (Fig. 5).

1. Geophysical survey followed by excavation of four small trenches by Dyfed Archaeological Trust in 2008. The investigations revealed complex archaeology dating from the twelfth century to the twentieth century. Evidence of medieval occupation was revealed including the layout of burgage plots in the town of Newtown. A ceramic assemblage was recovered, including fourteenth/fifteenth century floor tiles from a high status house pre-dating the 1532 documentary record of a mansion. The archaeological deposits lay beneath shallow topsoil. Reference: Schlee 2008 (94534).

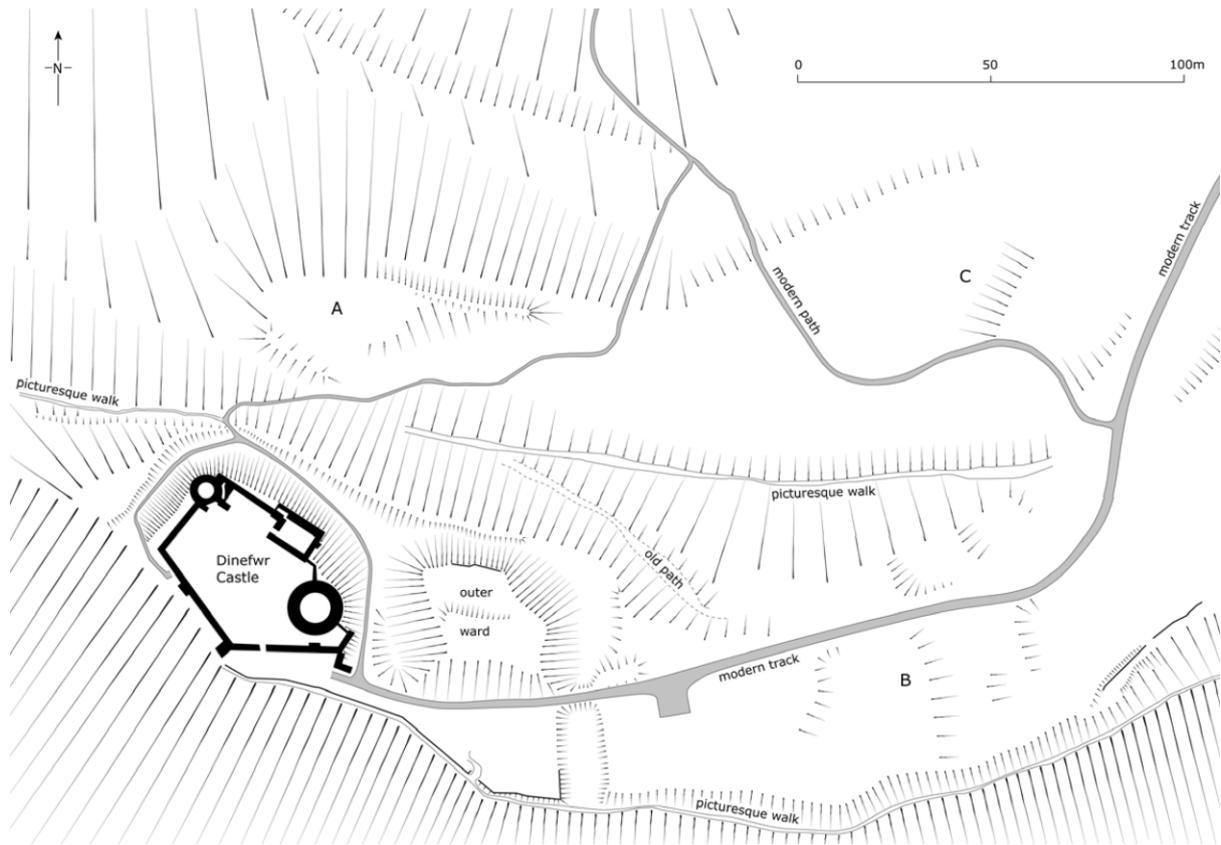


The 2008 geophysical survey showing the location of excavation trenches.



The 2008 excavations - Trench 1 to the east of Newton House.

2. In 2008 a topographic survey followed by the excavation of 23 widely dispersed test pits was undertaken in the area of the town of Dinefwr close to Dinefwr Castle. The survey defined boundaries, probably of burgage plots, but no artefacts or structural evidence was found during the test pitting. Schlee 2008 (94533).



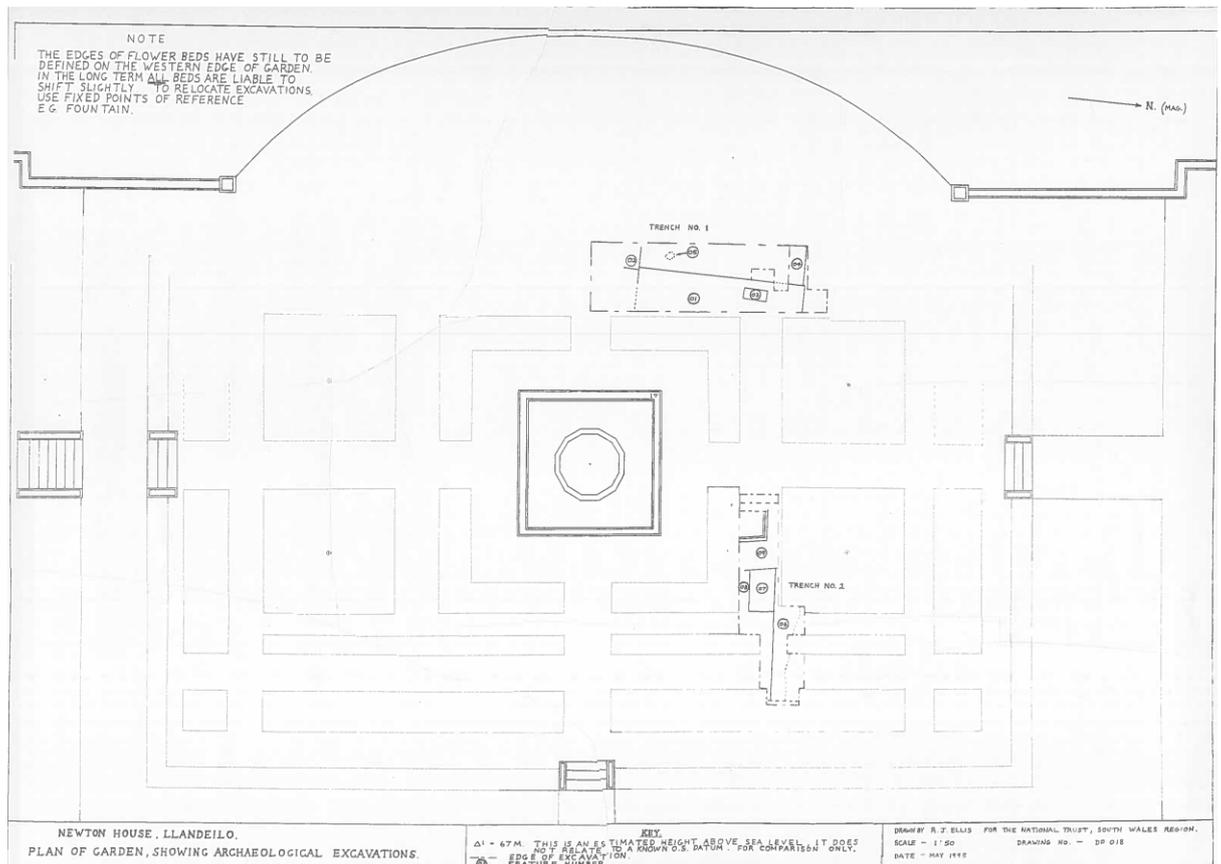
The topographic survey of Dinefwr Castle and town showing burgage plots at B, with other houses possibly at A.

3. A watching brief was maintained during minor groundworks in the inner courtyard at Newton House. Cobbled surfaces and other features relating to the extant buildings were recorded. Shobbrook and Ratty 2010 (HER 99811).



Cobbled surface uncovered during the watching brief on the inner courtyard.

4. Small-scale excavations during the National Trust's 1995 restoration of the Victorian garden on the west side of Newton House revealed substantial stone foundations approximately 0.2m below the garden's surface in association with fragments of ceramic tiles. The foundations are almost certainly those of a mansion pre-dating the present Newton House built in c.1660; the first mansion, built in 1552 was replaced between 1595 and 1603. Copies of four drawings of the excavation are lodged with the Dyfed Historic Environment Record.



Plan showing the location of the archaeological trenches in the Victorian garden.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL POTENTIAL

The twin towns of Dinefwr and Newtown have high potential to address some key agenda items for research for 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 post-medieval research theme on settlements (towns).

Topographic survey and LiDAR data have located the town of Dinefwr with a high degree of confidence, but due to dense deciduous woodland it has not been possible to satisfactorily investigate surviving archaeological deposits. It must be assumed that they survive and that they have the potential to provide information on life in a small Welsh twelfth- and thirteenth-century town.

Archaeological investigations in Newtown, although small-scale, have successfully demonstrated that stratified deposits dating from the town's foundation, its decline and subsequent use as the site of successive mansions, survive. Everywhere in the environs of Newton House has high archaeological potential.

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

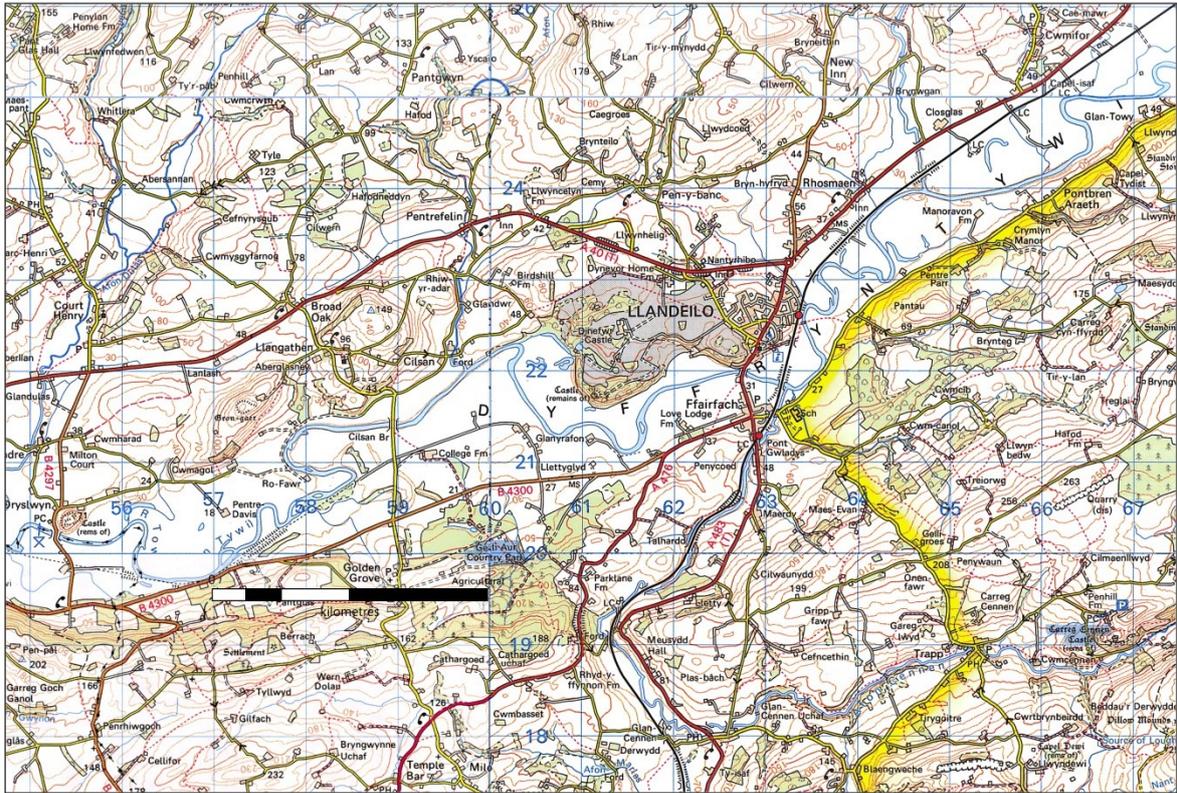


Figure 1. Location map.

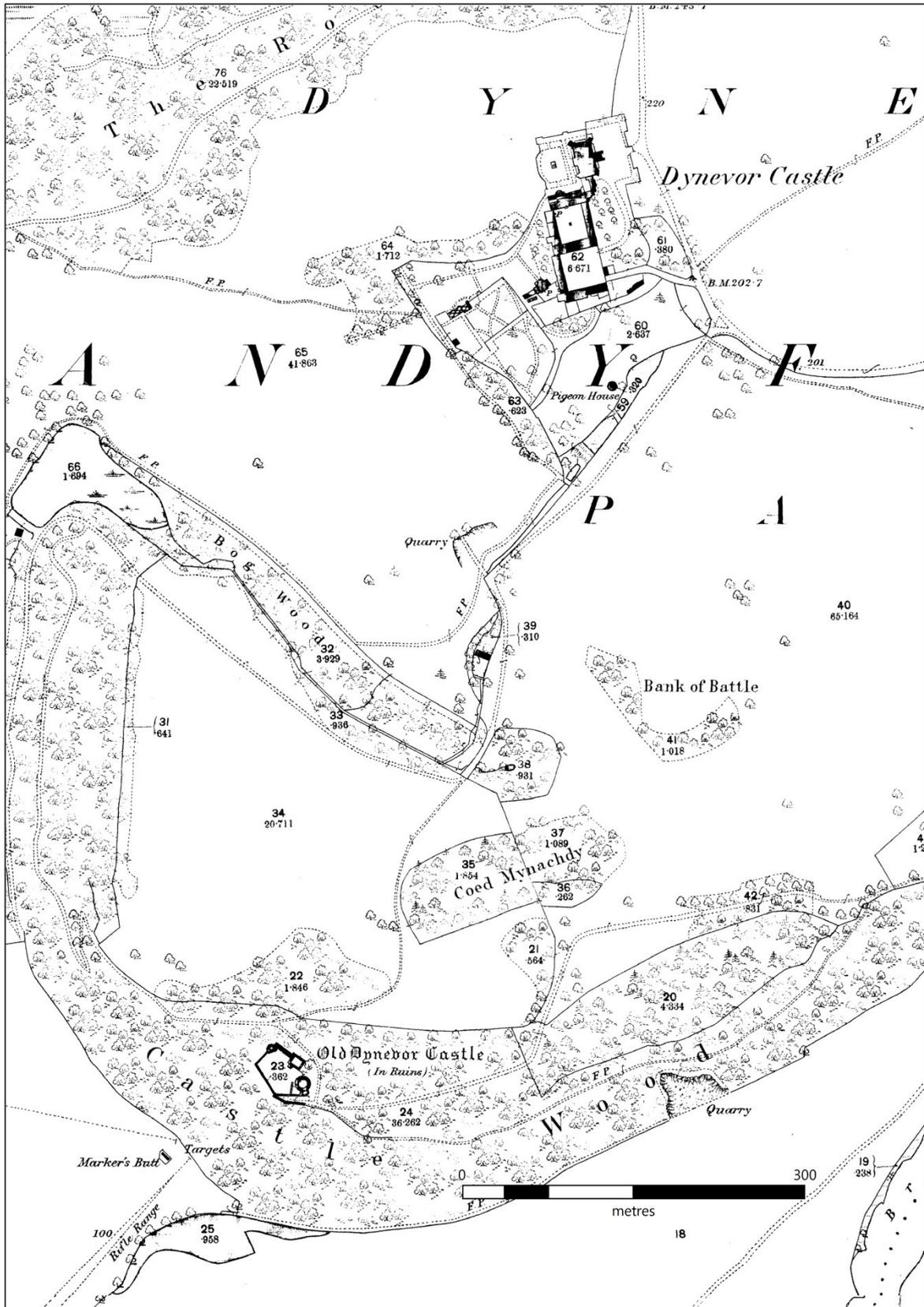


Figure 2. Extract from the Ordnance Survey 1:2500 1st edition map of 1886 (Carmarthenshire 33.15).

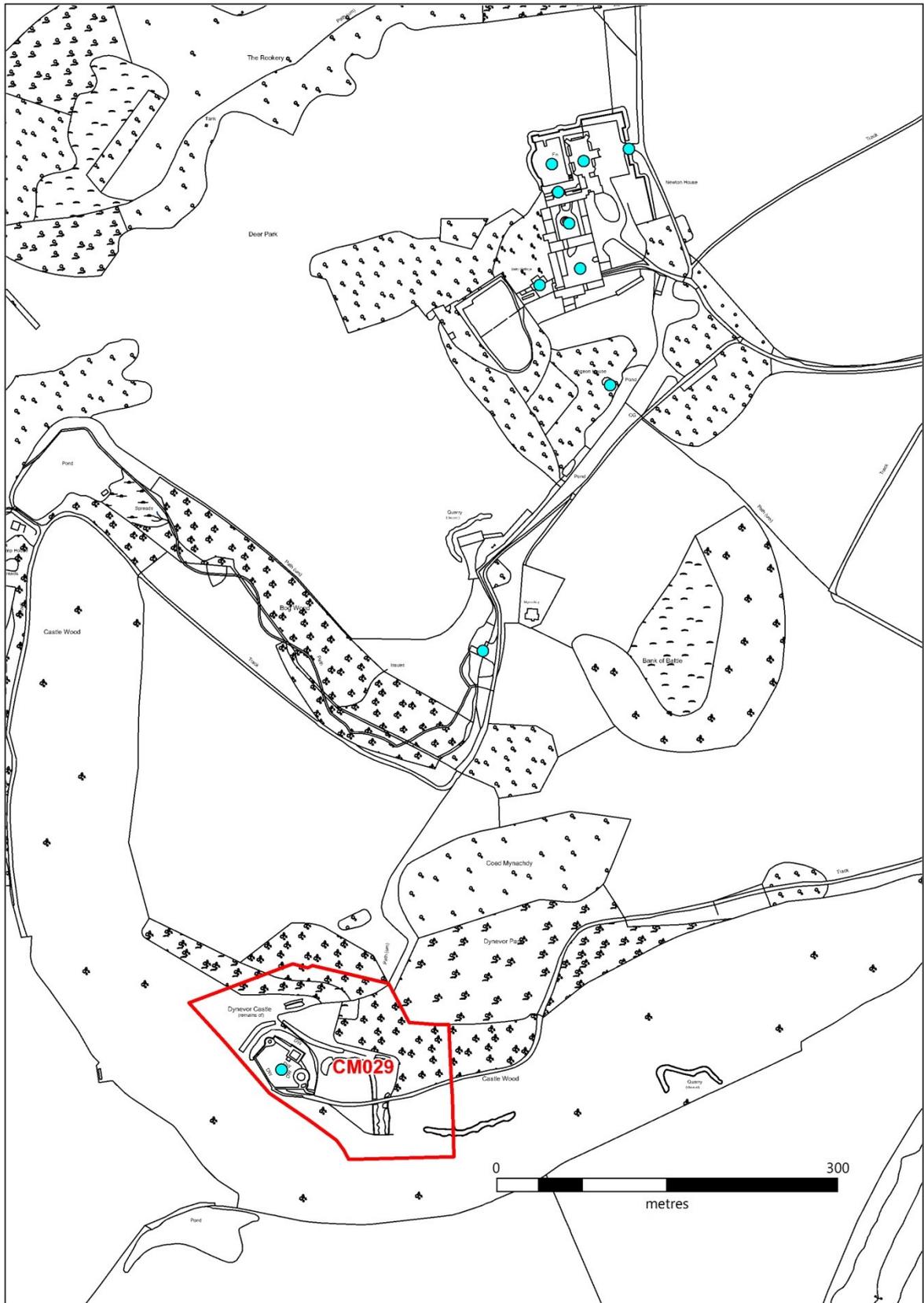


Figure 3. Listed buildings (blue circles), scheduled monuments (outlined in red).



Figure 5. Location of archaeological interventions.