

# THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE MEDIEVAL TOWNS OF SOUTHWEST WALES

## DRYSLWYN



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**DRYSLWYN**

By

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# **DRYSLWYN**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

A small, defended, hilltop Welsh town developed outside the gates of Dryslwyn Castle in the thirteenth century. At the end of that century it was transformed into an 'English' borough following Edward I's conquest of Wales. At its peak it consisted of 50-55 houses and was defended by a town wall. It declined during the later fourteenth century and seems to have been largely abandoned by the mid-fifteenth century. Substantial earthworks of house platforms and of the defensive circuit survive on the hilltop. Excavations have highlighted the high archaeological potential of Dryslwyn.

## **KEY FACTS**

Status: Borough. 1391 charter confirmed earlier rights

Size: 1303-04 town of 50-55 houses.

Archaeology: Town gate, section of defence circuit and a house site excavated.

## **LOCATION**

Dryslwyn Castle and town occupy a prominent hill that rises 50m from the floodplain of the Towy Valley in Carmarthenshire (SN 5546 2041). The town of Carmarthen lies 14km downstream and Llandeilo 8km upstream. Dryslwyn sits at a nexus of routeways, with the Towy valley providing an excellent east/west corridor and the Afon Dulas and Afon Cothi valleys giving access to the rolling hill country to the north. A minor valley provides a gateway to the south.

## **HISTORY**

This short historical account is based on Chris Caple's (2007) comprehensive published account.

Rhys Grug founded Dryslwyn Castle for his son Maredudd ap Rhys in the late 1220s. A small settlement developed outside the castle gates and in 1281 Edward I granted Maredudd the right to hold an annual four-day fair, an important development in the proto-Welsh town. Defended Welsh towns of the period are rare, but Dryslwyn was such an example as documents in 1287 record payments for cleaning out the town ditch. Following a siege in 1287 Edward I confiscated the castle from Maredudd and set about strengthening it. Edward also greatly expanded the town creating 37 burgage plots and promoting immigration. Of the new burgesses only four were Welsh. Accounts of 1301/04 and 1303/04 record the 37 burgages within the town and 16½ in the vill below the castle. The town now consisted of 50-55 houses, and an estimated population of

250-275. It has been suggested that those inside the town defences were 'English' burgesses and those outside lacked the same rights and privileges and were probably Welsh.

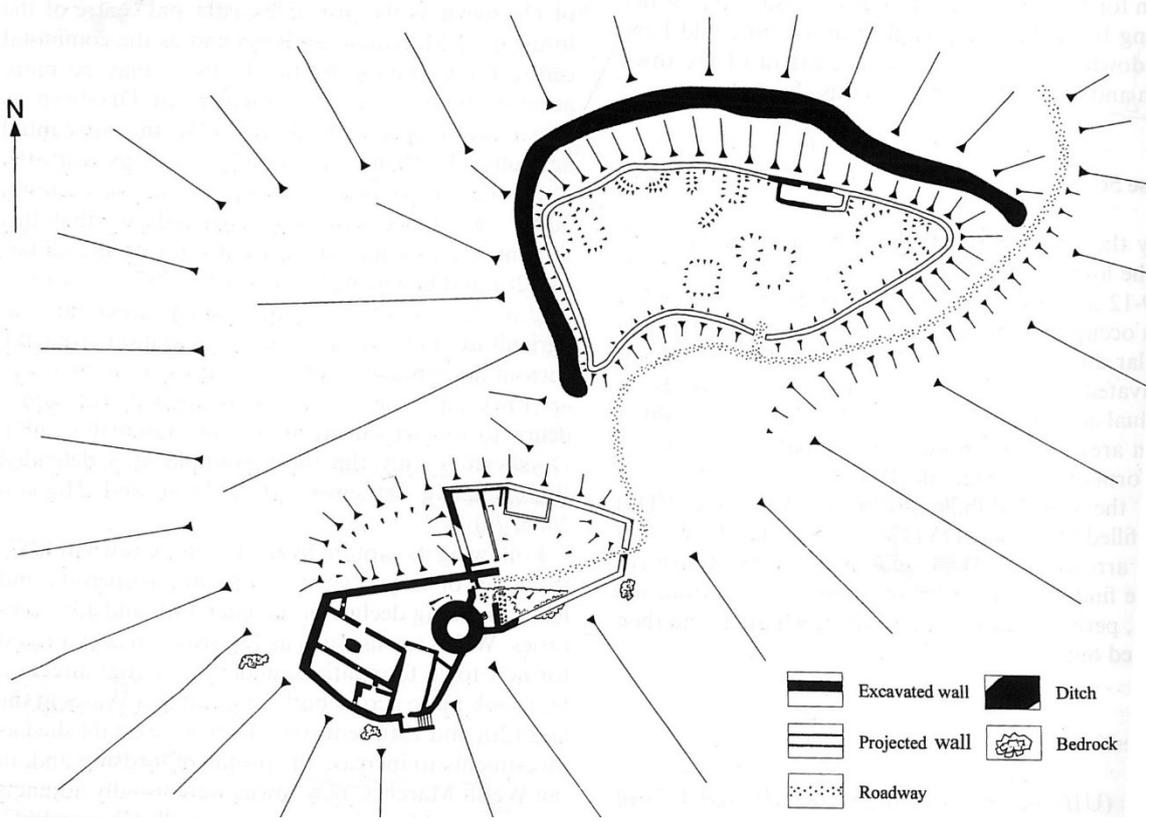
Although the presence of burgesses and an annual fair implies borough status there is no known town charter for this early period of the town, and it is not until 1391 that lost charters of 1324 and 1355 were confirmed.

Accounts of 1356/7 specifically mention the town walls and also that some people lived outside the walls on Bridge Street. A bridge over the Towy had replaced the original ford by this date with the 14 burgages outside the walls presumably lay on the slope leading down to the floodplain. Overall the town seems to have contracted slightly by 1356/7. The return of the plague to west Wales in 1361 and 1369 probably caused further depopulation and the 1391 reconfirmation of privileges was probably an attempt to rekindle the town. The charter was again confirmed in 1444, but by then it is probable that by then the town was virtually deserted.

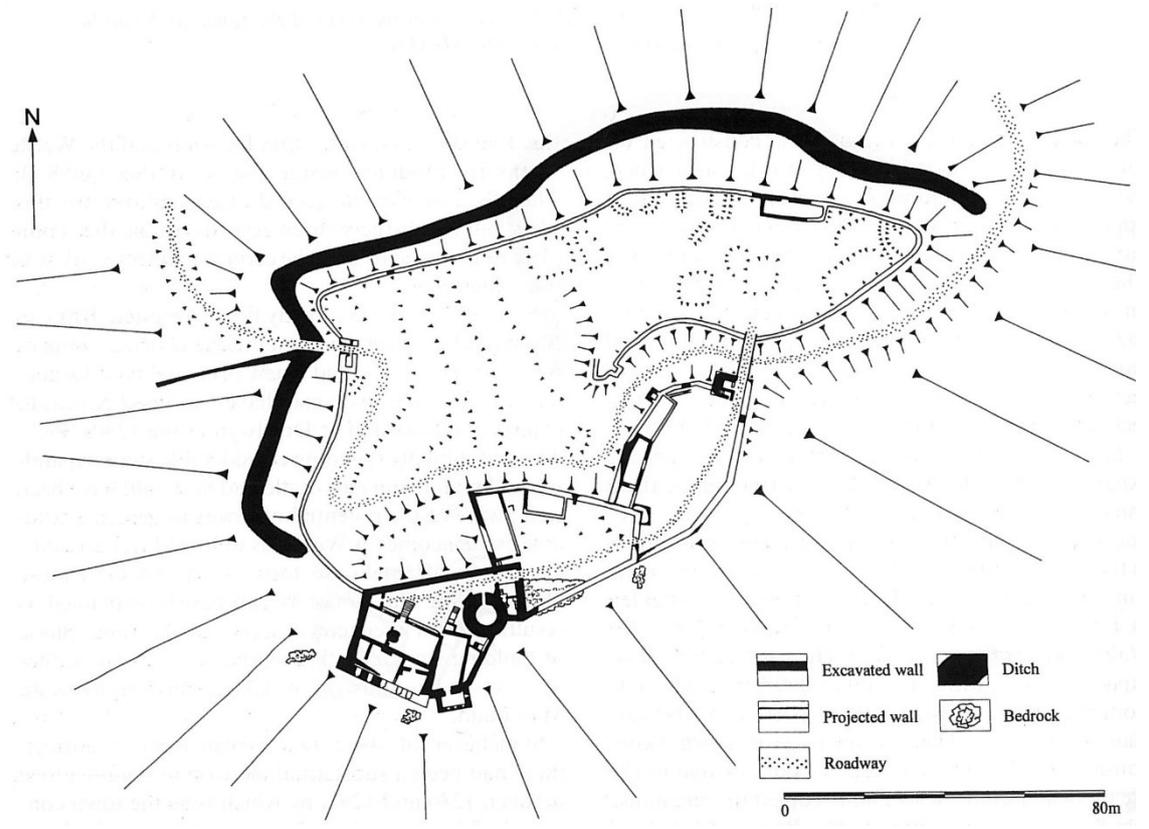
## **MORPHOLOGY**

The town and castle occupy the summit and upper slopes of the grass-covered Dryslwyn Hill. Substantial earthworks mark the locations of the medieval houses and the town defences. Caple (2007) gives a full description of the morphology of the town.

Earlier authorities placed the town at the foot of the hill; this has been shown to be incorrect.

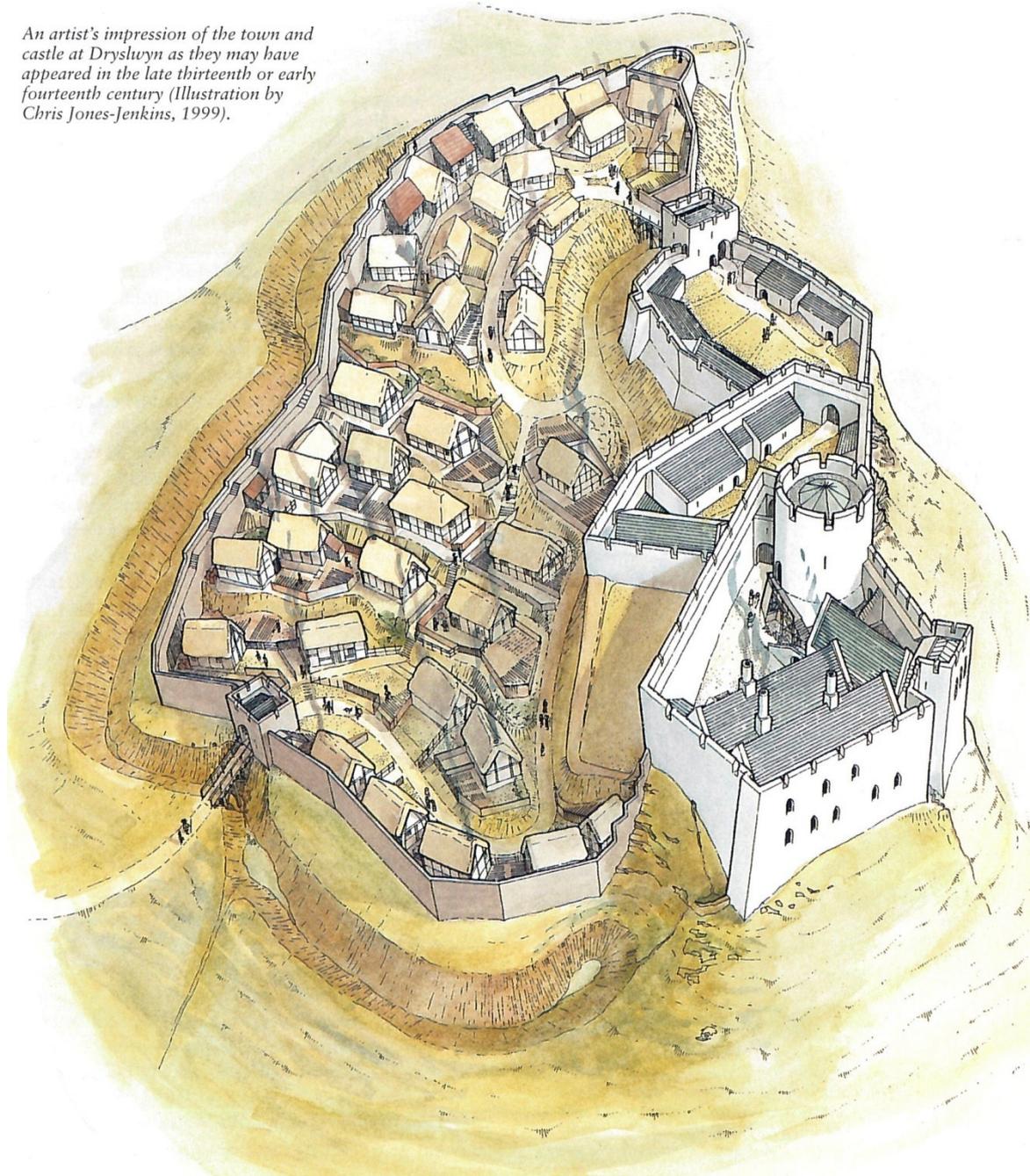


The Welsh town in the third quarter of the thirteenth century (from Caple 2007, fig. 8.6).



The English borough in the early fourteenth century (from Caple 2007, fig. 8.8).

*An artist's impression of the town and castle at Dryslwyn as they may have appeared in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century (Illustration by Chris Jones-Jenkins, 1999).*



*Artist's impression of the town in the late thirteenth/early fourteenth century (from Rees and Caple 1999).*

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

### **Scheduled Monuments**

There is one scheduled monument in the area: Dryslwyn Castle (CM030). This encompasses the whole of the hill (Fig. 2).

### **Listed Buildings**

The masonry remains of the Castle are a listed building grade I.

## **Conservation Area**

Dryslwyn is not a conservation area.

## **Registered Parks and Gardens**

There are no registered parks and gardens at Dryslwyn.

## **Registered Historic Landscape**

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

## **Undesignated Historic Environment Assets**

There are approximately 10 sites and monuments on the Regional Historic Environment Record – all are related to elements of the castle and town.

## **ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS**

There has been one archaeological investigation; this was a major excavation examining the castle and town 1980-95. It is fully published (Caple 2007). The town gatehouse, a section of the town defences and a house were excavated, plus several other smaller areas. Artefacts were not common, but stratified deposits were present at the house site.

## **ARCHAEOLOGICAL POTENTIAL**

Dryslwyn has high potential to address some key agenda items for research for the medieval period, including: town plantation and castle building, Norman expansion into southwest Wales and Welsh resistance and adaptation.

The archaeological investigations within the town have been relatively small-scale; nevertheless they have demonstrated that well-stratified, undisturbed deposits survive.

## **REFERENCES**

### **Published and unpublished**

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Rees S E and Caple C 1999. *Dinefwr Castle and Dryslwyn Castle* (Cardiff: Cadw).

Soulsby I 1983. *The Towns of Medieval Wales*, (Chichester: Phillimore).

Soulsby I and Jones D 1977. The archaeological implications of redevelopment in the historic towns of the Borough of Dinefwr, Urban Research Unit Department of Archaeology University College Cardiff unpublished report.

### **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>

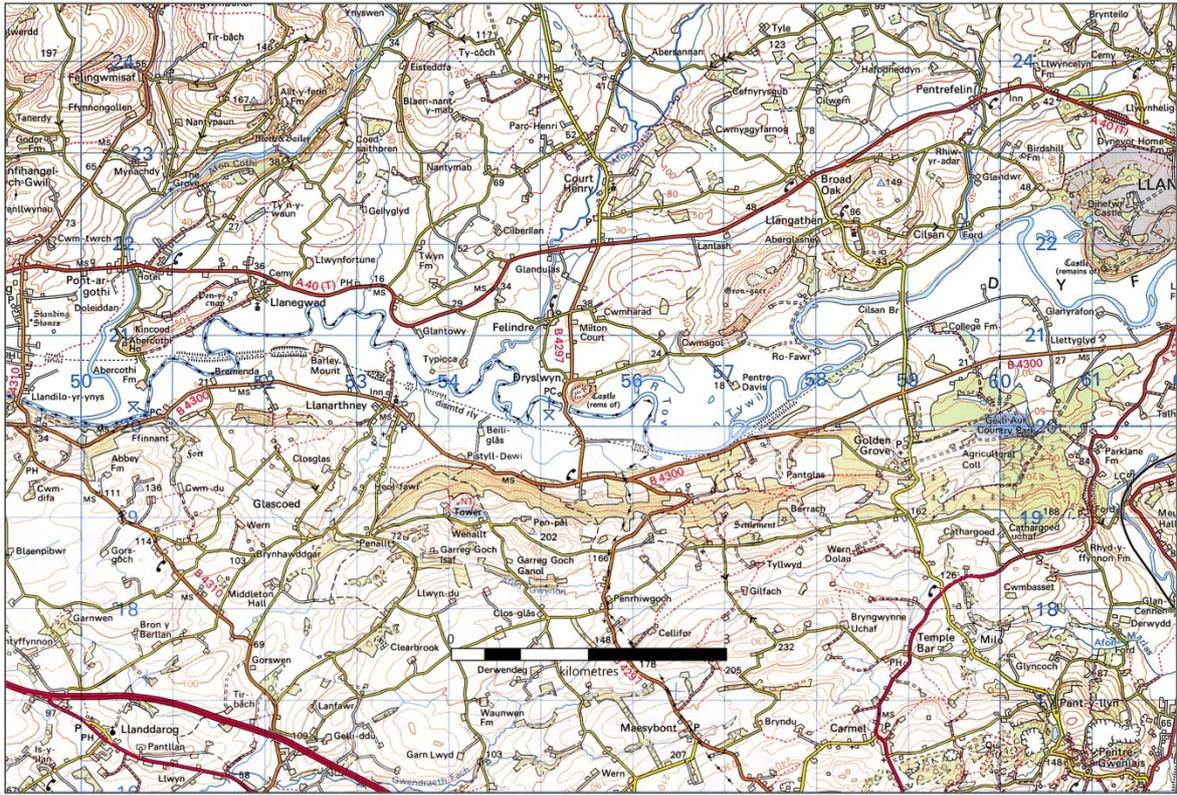


Figure 1. Location map.

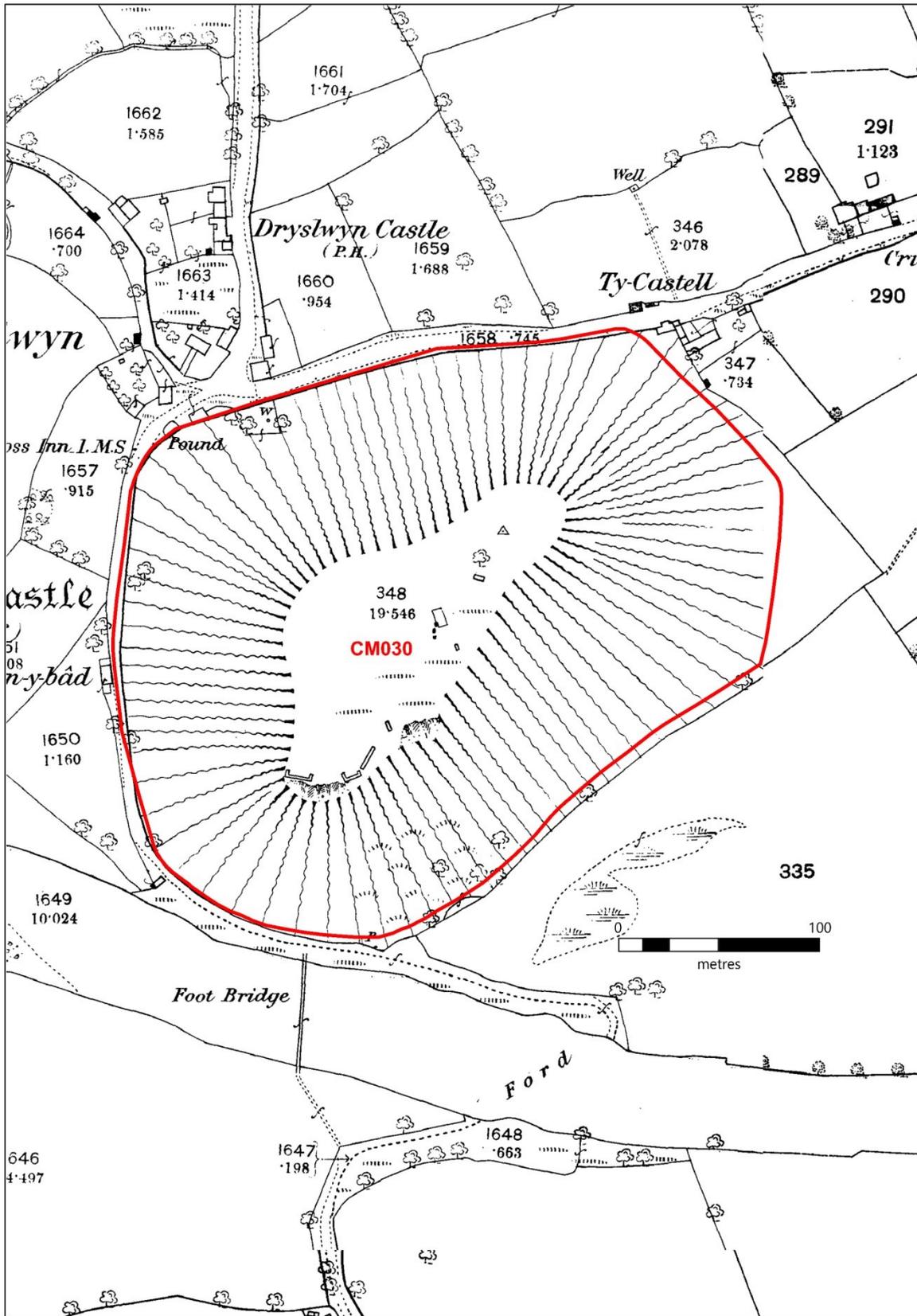


Figure 2. Extract from the Ordnance Survey 1:2500 1<sup>st</sup> edition map of 1888 (Carmarthenshire 40.04 and 41.01) showing the extent of the scheduled monument.