

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE MEDIEVAL TOWNS OF SOUTHWEST WALES

LAUGHARNE



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By

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LAUGHARNE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A castle was founded at Laugharne in the early twelfth century and a settlement soon developed outside the castle gates, but it was not until 1247 that Guy de Brian granted Laugharne a town charter, and not until 1465 that a licence was granted to provide the town with walls –this was almost certainly permission to convert earth and timber defences to stone. The area of the walled town was very small and it is likely that by the later medieval period the greater part of the town lay outside the defences. The town declined from at least the end of the sixteenth century and did not start to recover until the end of eighteenth century. Apart from extensive excavations in the castle, archaeological investigations have been small-scale. They have, however, demonstrated that significant medieval and later archaeological deposits are likely to survive in many locations in the town.

KEY FACTS

Status: 1247 town charter, weekly market and annual fair.

Size: Unknown – in 1592 161½ burgages were recorded.

Archaeology: Excavations have revealed archaeological deposits dating from twelfth/thirteenth centuries.

LOCATION

Laugharne lies on the west bank of the River Tâf at its confluence with the small River Coran (SN 302 108), Carmarthenshire. Immediately downstream of Laugharne the Tâf merges with the Towy and Gwendraeth rivers forming an extensive estuary. At high tides water laps around the foot of Laugharne castle and town; at low tide the estuary is a wide expanse of sand and mud with the Tâf a narrow channel. The towns of Carmarthen, Kidwelly and St Clears also lie on the tidal Towy/ Tâf/Gwendraeth estuaries.

HISTORY

Excavations in the castle found evidence of Roman occupation (AD second – fourth centuries) and perhaps of defensive works taking place immediately before the earliest documentary reference to the castle in AD 1116. As with other castles in southwest Wales, Laugharne alternated between Welsh control and English control. However, in 1247, Guy de Brian took control of the castle and it remained in the hands of de Brian family until the late fourteenth century. The first castle of timber and earth was replaced in stone at the end of the twelfth century, but it was the de Brian's who transformed the castle into a major stronghold.

In the sixteenth century John Perrot converted the redundant medieval fortress into a Tudor mansion. The work was left uncompleted on his death in 1592. Apart from a siege in 1644 during the Civil War the castle was left to fall into quiet decay until 1973 when the State took it into guardianship and started a programme of restoration.

It is assumed that during the twelfth century a settlement developed organically outside the castle gates. In 1247 Guy de Brian granted Laugharne a town charter with annual fair and weekly market. Ten years later Rhys Fychan burnt the town. A new charter was granted in 1278-82; probably in an attempt to reinvigorate a failing town in the aftermath of its burning. The size of the town in the medieval period is not recorded.

In 1465, a licence was granted to wall the town. It seems likely that this licence was for permission to convert earth and timber defences to stone.

A survey of 1592 recorded 161½ burgages in the town.

The town seems to have declined from the end of the sixteenth century, as in 1751 Laugharne Corporation records stated 'ye whole street from the Gate above the Market House to the Cross the Church of be Ruinous.' However, the 1840 tithe map shows approximately the same number of burgages as were recorded in the 1592 survey (Fig. 2).

In the late eighteenth century Laugharne became a popular place to retire to for those who could not afford Bath and other English spa towns. This resulted in the construction of numerous fine two- and three-storey Georgian houses. However, from the late-nineteenth century the town went into steady decline, experiencing modest growth until the mid-twentieth century when a small housing estate was built on the southern edge of the town.

St Martin's parish church, lying to the north of the core of the town, is a substantial medieval building with limited evidence of it being a pre-Norman foundation.

MORPHOLOGY

The castle lies at the heart of the town. The main street, Market Street, leads directly north from the castle. Wogan Street and Duncan Street lead off Market Street to the west and Market Lane to the east (Fig. 3). These streets, with the market place at the junction of Market Street and Market Lane now occupied by the Town Hall/Market Hall, form the core of the medieval town. Analysis of the 1592 survey demonstrates that there were just 25 burgages within the town defences (32½ if one includes the 7½ that John Perrot acquired for a garden adjacent to the castle – these lay on the south side of Market Lane (see Fig. 3 for their location). Apart from some amalgamation and division

the layout of medieval burgages can be traced on the 1840 tithe map and more recent maps.

The defensive circuit is shown on Figure 2. One town gate stood at the north end of Market Street, one at the bottom of either Wogan Street or Duncan Street (Curtis places it on Wogan Street just above Island House) and one probably close to the end of Victoria Street. Earlier authorities suggested that the defences enclosed a larger area (Fig.2); this is probably not correct, but massive stone blocks uncovered during the construction of houses at Moir Gardens in the early 1980s could have formed part of a never fully realised extended defensive circuit.

It is highly likely that in the medieval period burgages were laid out along King Street, which continues the line of Market Street to the north. The 1592 survey records 34½ burgages on the west side of King Street and 18 on the east side; allowing for amalgamation of some and division of others these are readily traceable on modern maps.

Until the nineteenth century the parish church of St Martin's stood in an isolated location to the north of the town. It is only since then that ribbon development has connected the two.

The Grist at the bottom of Wogan Street is traditionally the site of Christ Church on account of human remains turning up, but the name could equally refer to a grist (corn) mill. It was almost certainly a tidal inlet in the medieval period, perhaps the location of wharfs and jetties.

Island House, a structure possibly containing early modern elements, stands behind a high stone wall on the edge of The Grist at the bottom of Wogan Street. Excavations have revealed deeply stratified medieval deposits going back to at least the thirteenth century in the garden of Island House, possibly associated with the port. There are nineteenth century accounts of Roman remains found here. Opposite it was the mill, the structure of which survives but much modified.

Gosport Street winds up the hillside to the south of The Grist. The 1592 survey records 84 burgages on the south side of The Grist and on Gosport Street. The c.1840 tithe map provides a reasonably accurate depiction on these plots.

Figures 7 and 8 show Laugharne how it may have been in c.1150 and c.1320.

BUILDINGS AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES AND MONUMENTS

Scheduled Monuments

Laugharne Castle (CM003) is the only scheduled monument in the town. Several elements of it (the main castle, the outer gatehouse, walls and a gazebo) are also listed buildings (Fig. 4).

An enclosure to the east of the town is designated a scheduled monument. It is probably Iron Age in date, but is connected to the town as the possible location where cannons were mounted during the 1644 siege of the castle.

Listed Buildings

There are 53 listed buildings in Laugharne, including the castle, St Martin's Church, the town hall/market hall and a cross on the Grist. Almost all however are Georgian and later houses, and with most of these lying on King Street and Market Street.

Conservation Area

Laugharne conservation area is extensive and includes the built up areas and peripheral fields, woodland and coastal marsh.

Registered Parks and Gardens

The gardens of Laugharne Castle and the adjacent Castle House are a Registered Park and Garden, Grade II.

Registered Historic Landscape

Laugharne lies in the Tâf and Towy Estuary Registered Historic Landscape. It has been characterised in the Laugharne Town and Broadway character area.

Undesignated Historic Environment Assets

There are approximately 110 sites and monuments on the Regional Historic Environment Record. However, many of these are duplicate records of listed buildings (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. Apart from the excavations in the castle, archaeological investigations in the town have been small-scale. Individually they do not provide great insight, but collectively they begin to provide picture of the archaeology of the town and by extension of the people who lived there.

Numbers in parentheses below refer to records in the Dyfed Historic Environment Record (Fig. 6).

1. The main archaeological investigation in Laugharne was the excavation in the castle in the late 1970s/early 1980s as part of the consolidation and restoration works by Cadw. These revealed complex archaeological deposits within the castle: three interim reports have been published; the final report is awaited. Since then a small-scale investigation in the castle has been undertaken in conjunction with repairs and maintenance. References: Avent and Read 1977, Avent 1978, Avent 1979, Shobbrook and Poucher 2017 (HER 112037).



The 2017 evaluation in Laugharne Castle.



The 1978 excavations at Laugharne Castle.

2. A watching brief and building recording at Eynon's Down on the north side of Newbridge Street in 2000. Machining was undertaken using a toothed bucket. In part of the development clearance had been carried out prior to the watching brief. During the excavation of foundation trenches two walls were recorded pre-dating the existing wall; no dating evidence for these was noted. With the extant old agricultural buildings existing concrete floors were found to lie directly onto geological deposits, whilst externally ground levels had been raised in living memory and thus new foundation trenches did not penetrate into underlying deposits. Evans 2000 (HER 42682).
3. A watching brief was undertaken on a pipe-trench alongside the burial ground at Longlane House close to the parish church. Nothing of archaeological interest was recorded. Dyfed Archaeological Trust 2008 (HER 64748).



The Longlane House watching brief. Laugharne cemetery is visible in the background.

4. Building recording of the Butcher's House Arms, Wogan Street was undertaken in advance of demolition followed by a watching brief. Unfortunately the site was levelled prior to the commencement of the watching brief. Nevertheless, medieval and later archaeological deposits were visible in the section on the edge of the site, demonstrating the high archaeological potential of this area of the town. Murphy 1991 (HER 121733).



The Butcher's Arms House following demolition.



The Butcher's Arms House following site clearance showing a medieval/post-medieval pit in the edge of the site following clearance.

5. A watching brief was undertaken during two small developments on the east side of Clifton Street: Plot 1 Eldon and the Tin Shed Museum. Nothing of archaeological interest was noted. This low-lying area adjacent to the River Coran seems never to have been developed and was used as a dumping ground during the twentieth century. Kemp and Meek 2015 (HER 107551).



The completed topsoil strip at Plot 1, Eldon.



Foundation pads at the Tin Shed Musuem.

6. A small-scale evaluation on the east side of Clifton Street demonstrated that this area had never been built on. Recently dumped rubble overlay marsh deposits.
7. A watching brief was maintained during development on a plot on King Street. The site had been levelled at some point in the past and no significant archaeology survived. A report is awaited.
8. At the time of writing evaluation trial trenches are being excavated in the garden of Island House. Initial results indicate there is a considerable depth of garden soil. Foundations of walls have been noted below the soil.



Excavation trench in Island House garden showing early walls and cobbled surface.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL POTENTIAL

It has been demonstrated that archaeological remains from at least the twelfth century survive in the castle. However, the castle is a scheduled monument in care of the State and so archaeological investigations other than those associated with repair and maintenance are unlikely to take place.

Deposits dating to the earliest phases of the town to the present day have been demonstrated to survive within the area of the former walled town. Here there are pockets of undeveloped land which could contain undisturbed medieval and later deposits. Extant buildings in this area appear to be eighteenth century or later, but there is the potential that these mask earlier structures.

Deeply stratified medieval deposits survive in and around The Grist and at Island House. The tradition of there being a chapel here adds importance to this area. Island House is probably the oldest extant domestic structure in Laugharne, containing early modern elements.

Buildings fronting King Street date to the eighteenth century or later, but may contain earlier elements. There is potential for medieval and later archaeological deposits to survive, however many of the larger houses are cellared, and so earlier deposits may have been partly destroyed. There are few opportunities for new development along almost continuous street frontage of mainly listed buildings.

Medieval and possibly early medieval archaeological deposits will be present at St Martin's Church and churchyard and in the immediate vicinity.

Late medieval and later deposits are likely to be encountered to the south and west of The Grist and on both sides of Gosport Street. Extant buildings in this area appear to be eighteenth century or later, but there is the potential that these mask earlier structures.

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Databases and online references

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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.

LAUGHARNE
property boundaries c.1840

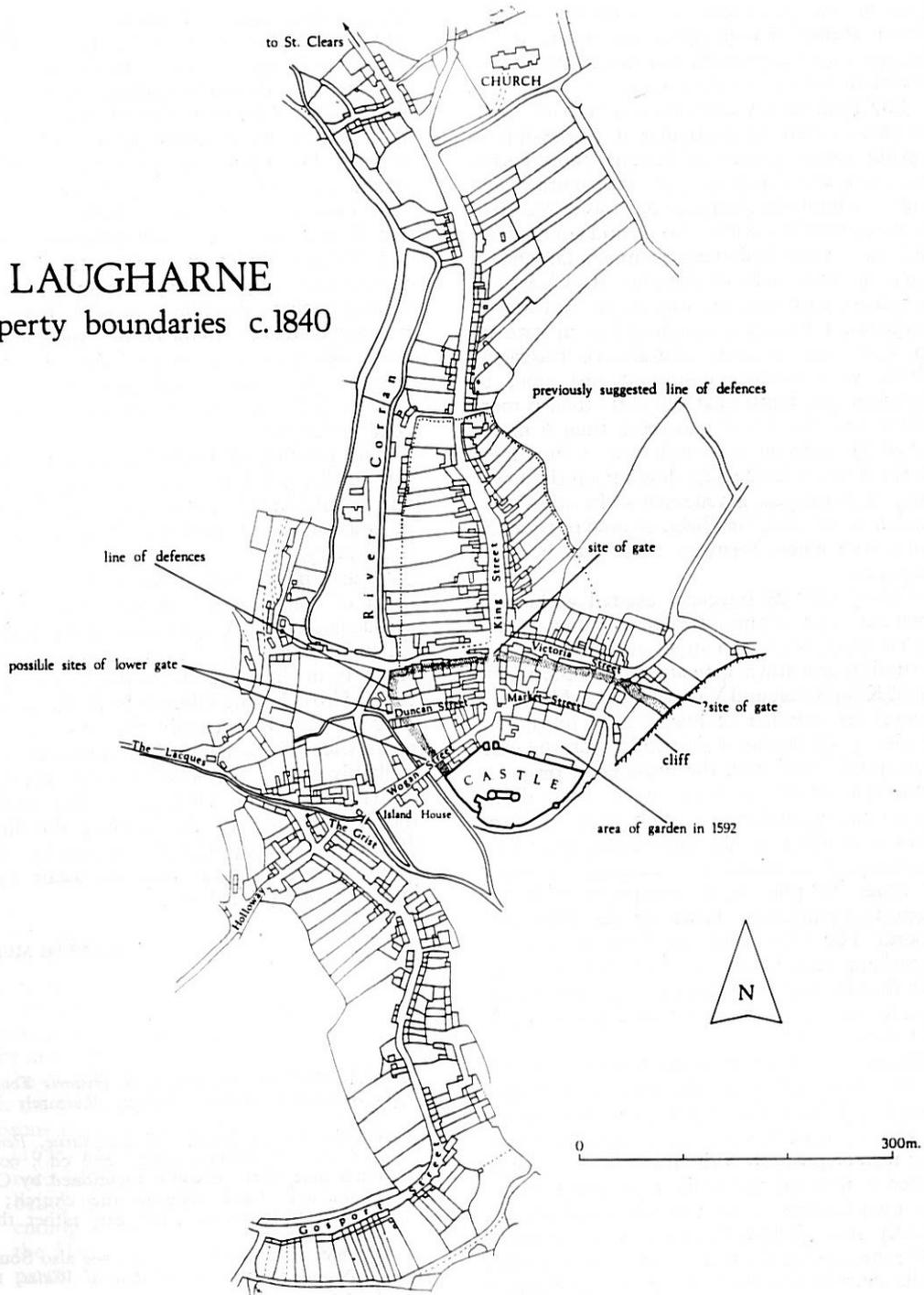


Figure 2. Tracing of the c.1840 Laugharne Township tithe map the location of location of the medieval town defences and other features labelled. From Murphy 1987.

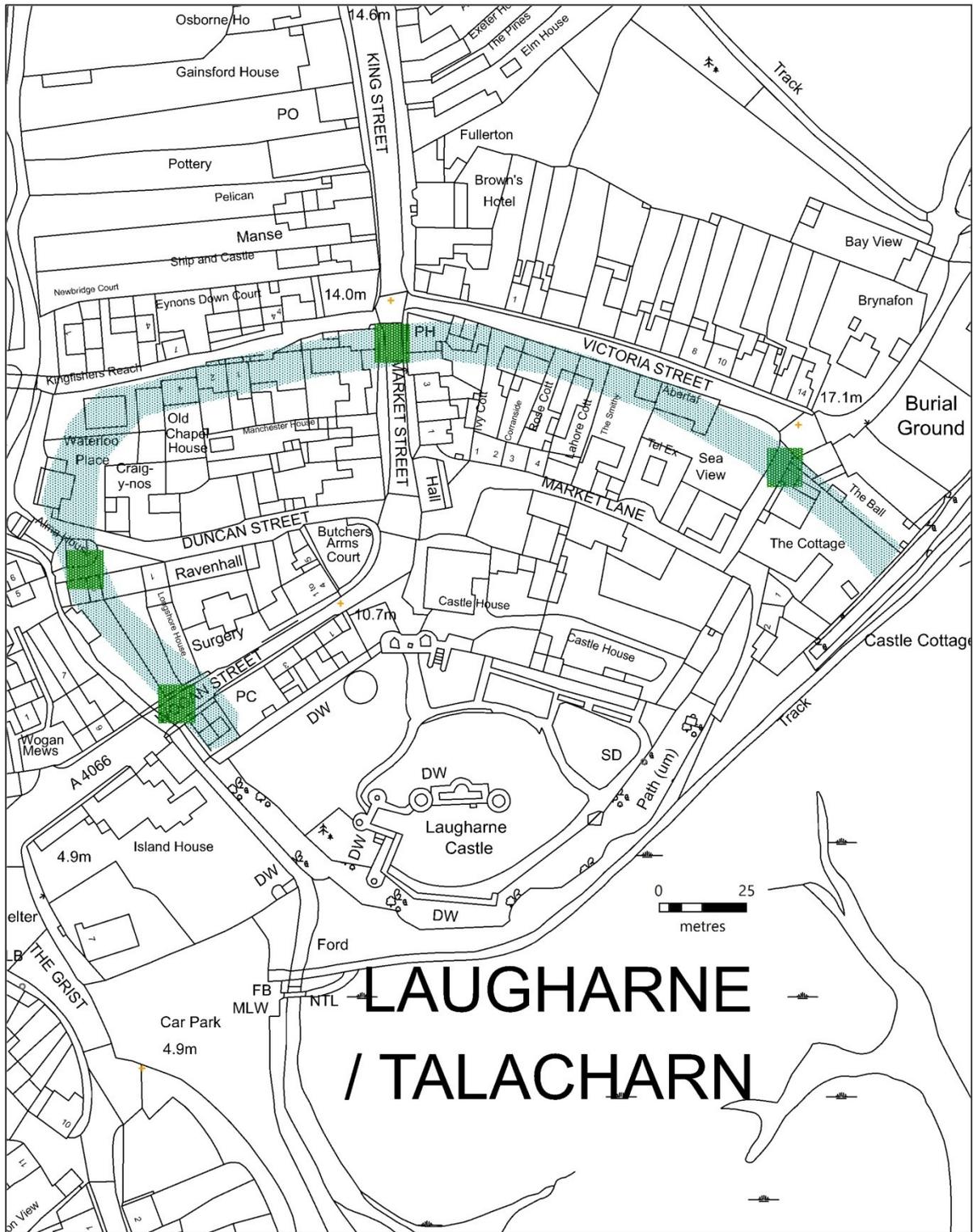


Figure 3. The possible line of the medieval town defences and gate locations. The location of the Market Street gate is certain, the others are more speculative. On the west side of the town there was a gate on Duncan Street or Wogan Street, not both.

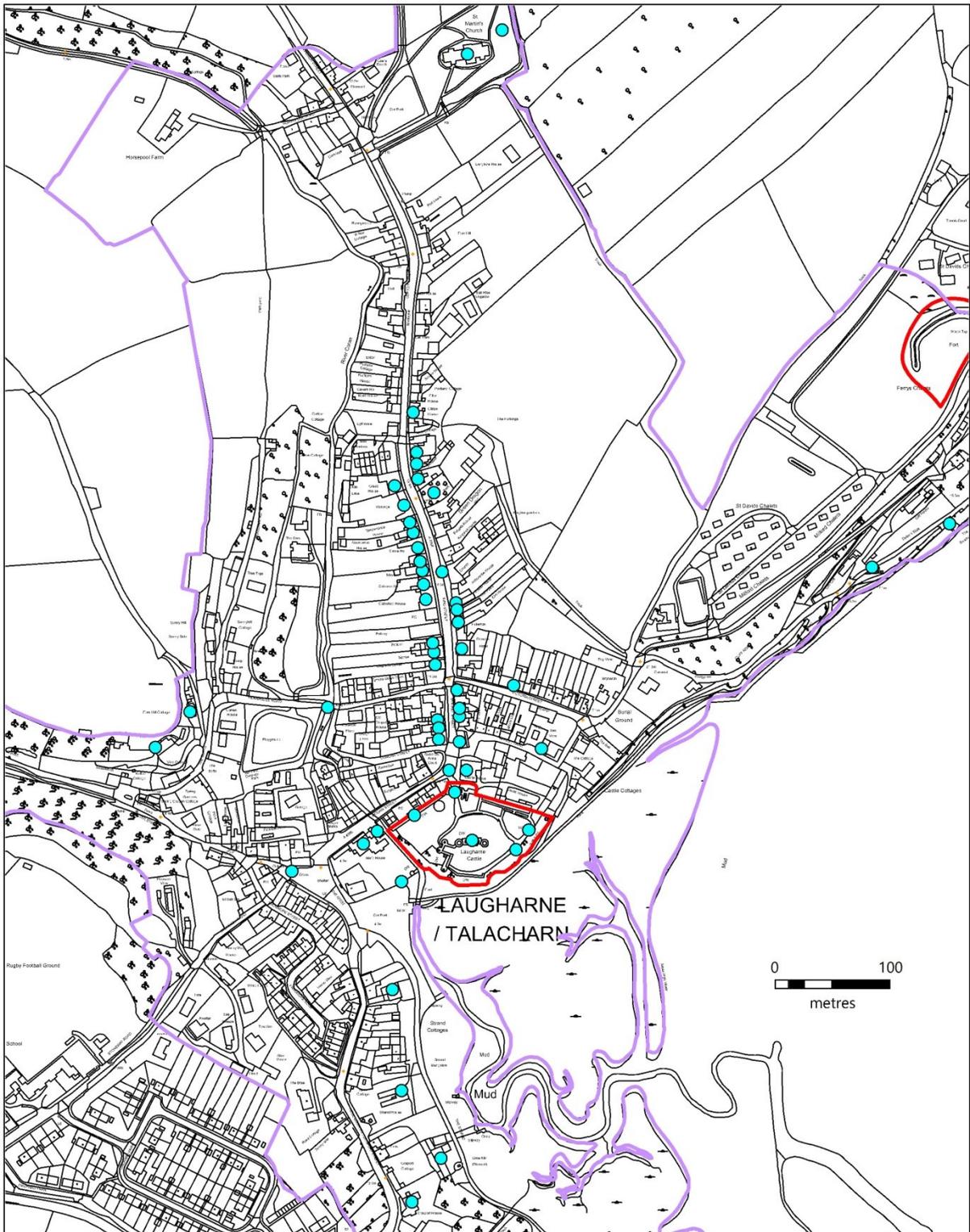


Figure 4. Listed buildings (blue circles), scheduled monuments (outlined in red) and the conservation area (outlined in purple).



Figure 5. Sites recorded on the Dyfed Historic Environment Record (red stars).

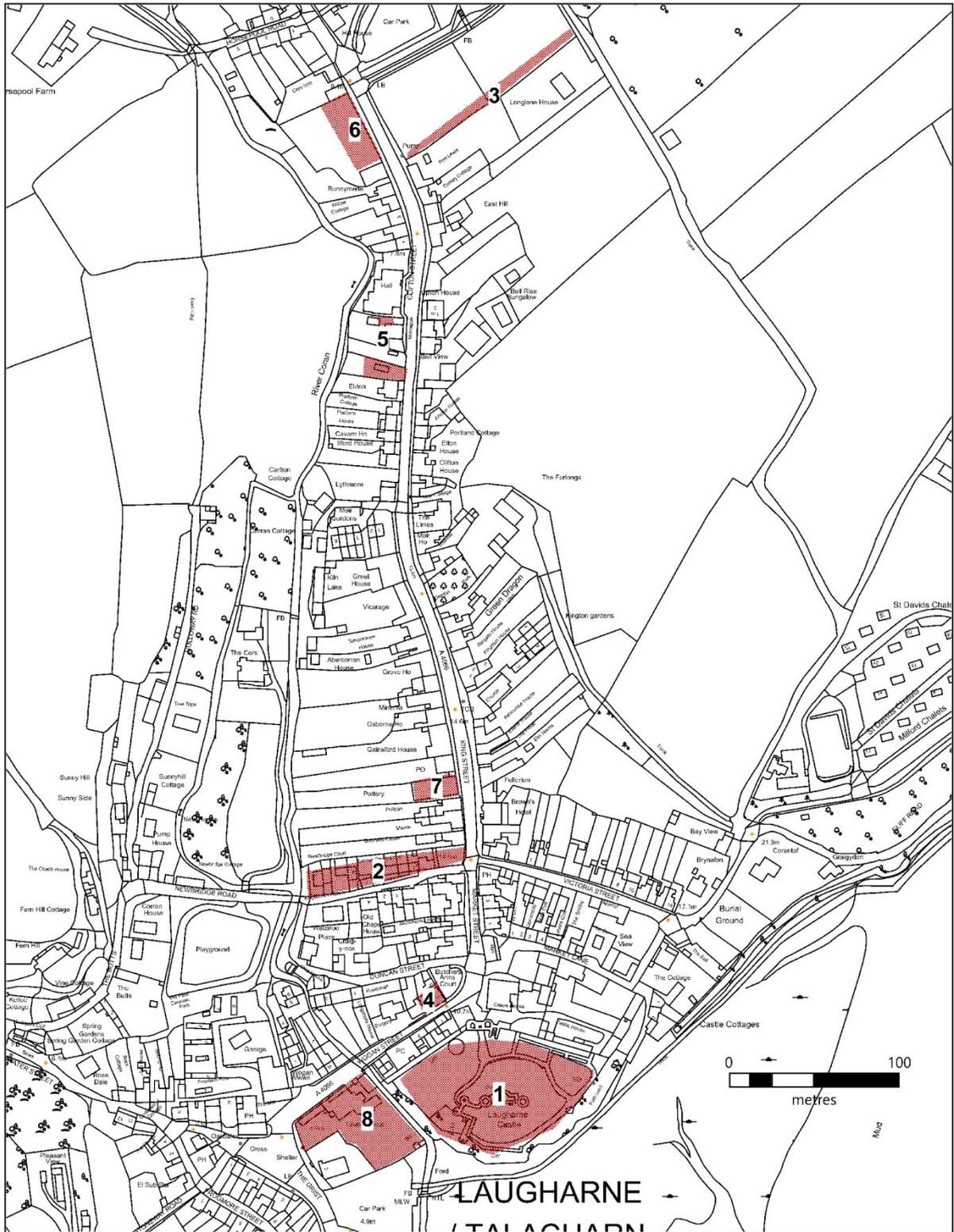


Figure 6. Location of archaeological interventions.

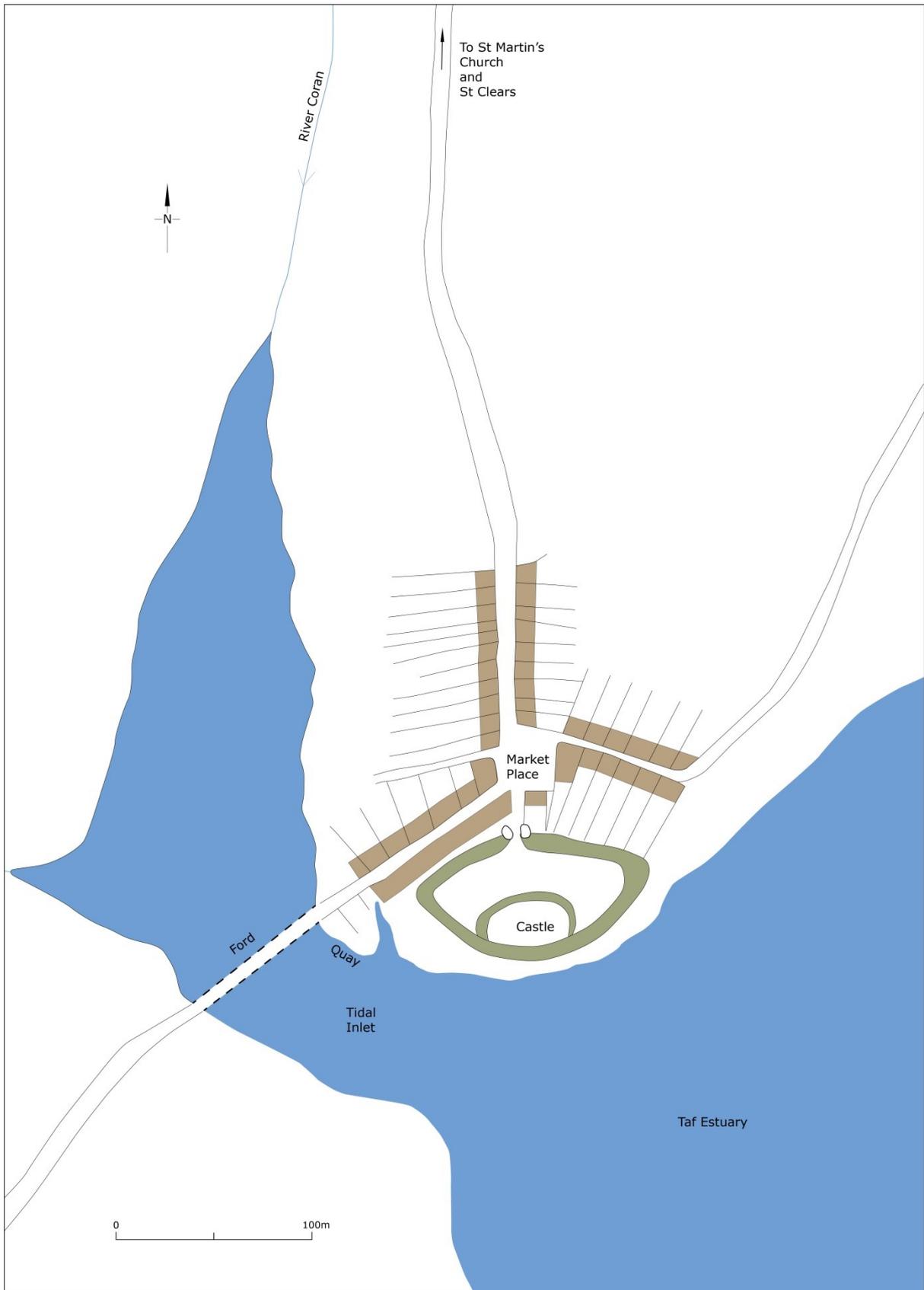


Figure 7. Conjectural plan of Laugharne as it may have been in c.1150.

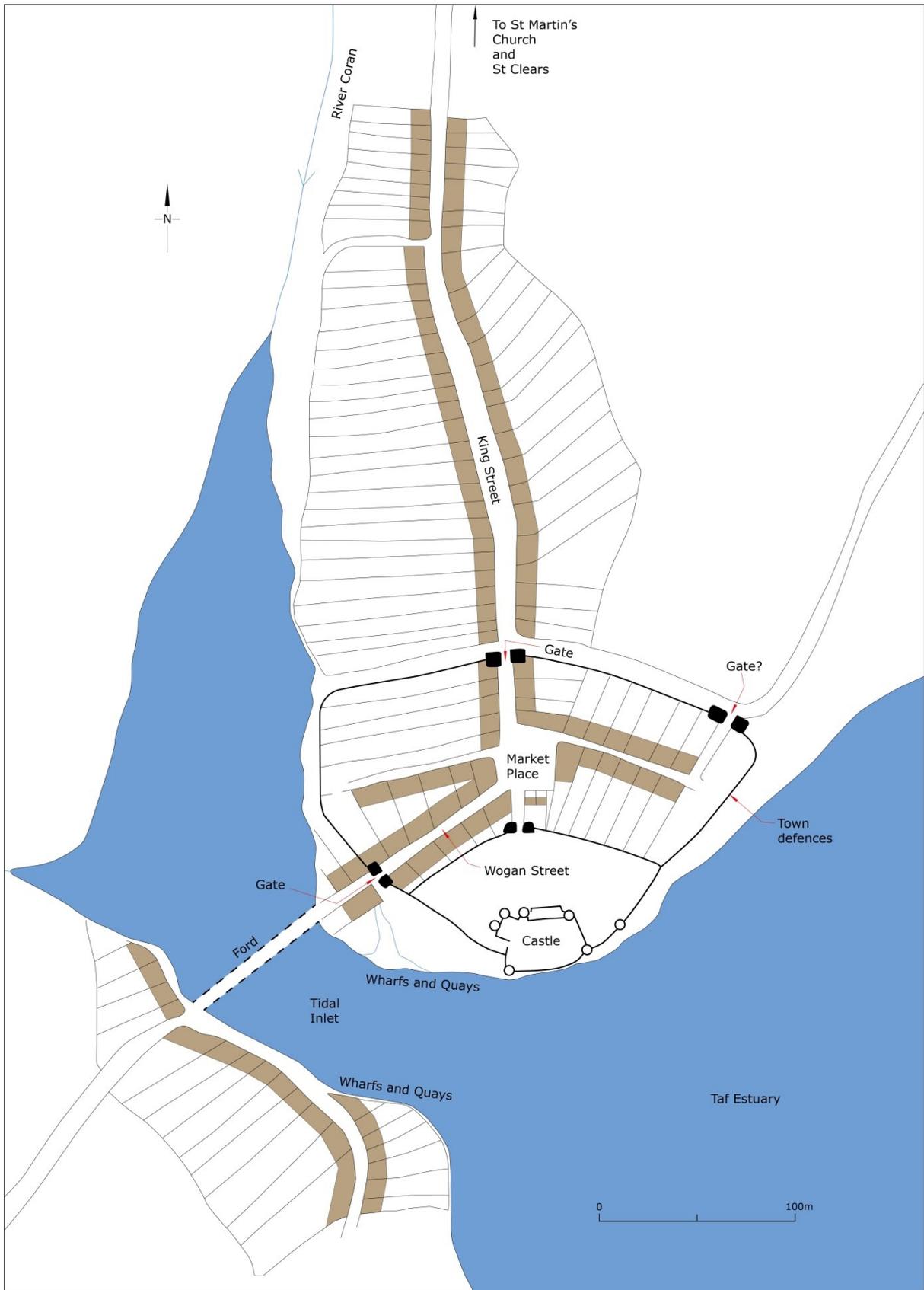


Figure 8. Conjectural plan of Laugharne as it may have been in c.1320.