

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE MEDIEVAL TOWNS OF SOUTHWEST WALES

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LLANDEILO FAWR

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Unlike many of the small towns of southwest Wales Llandeilo's origins go back to the early medieval period when St Teilo is reputed to have founded a religious community, perhaps in the sixth century. No known physical evidence survives of this foundation. In the twelfth century a settlement grew organically around St Teilo's Church, developing into a small town with annual fairs and a weekly market. There is little evidence for the town's subsequent fortunes, but it seems to have remained modest in size until the late eighteenth/nineteenth century. There have been no archaeological investigations in Llandeilo.

KEY FACTS

Status: Weekly market and three annual fairs.

Size: 1326 14 burgesses present.

Archaeology: No investigations have taken place.

LOCATION

Llandeilo lies on low hill on the north side of the River Towy in Carmarthenshire (SN 629 222). The Towy valley provides a good route corridor with easy access to Carmarthen 25 km to the west and into mid-Wales to the northeast. The town lies on a river crossing of the Towy, with a trunk road and railway line providing access to south Carmarthenshire and on to Swansea.

HISTORY

The Romans established a fort in c.AD 74 approximately 600m to the northwest of what is now Llandeilo. A small civil settlement developed outside the gates of the fort and although the fort was abandoned by c.AD 120 the settlement may have continued in use as the embryonic Llandeilo. The Romans built roads connecting forts. The exact courses of the Roman roads around Llandeilo have not been identified with certainty but one probably ran through what is now the town, crossing the River Towy close to the present road bridge and heading south to a fort on the Loughor estuary.

By tradition in the sixth century St Teilo founded a church at Llandeilo which became an ecclesiastic foundation of some significance with an estate up to 6000 acres in extent. The finely illuminated Book of St Teilo was housed here and with the two early medieval carved crosses, discovered during renovations of the church in the mid-nineteenth century, indicates the importance of the religious community at this period. However, Llandeilo's religious community declined in the ninth and tenth centuries.

During the twelfth century the bishops of Llandaff and St Davids disputed the extensive estates of St Teilo, with St Davids eventually establishing superiority. Later in that century some former properties of St Teilo formed part of the endowment of Talley Abbey. The 'villa de Lanteilo' is mentioned in 1213 when it was attacked and destroyed by Rhys Grug and in 1289 a bridge is recorded, presumably close to or on the site of the present road bridge. The town was granted three annual fairs and a weekly market. However, Llandeilo was one of the smallest and least profitable of the Bishop of St David's towns and in 1326 only fourteen burgesses were recorded, twelve men and two women.

The foundation of the twin towns of Dinefwr/Newton in the late thirteenth century just 1.6km to the west inhibited the development of Llandeilo. Rather surprisingly Dinefwr/Newton and Llandeilo survived the population crash of the mid-fourteenth century, but eventually the more advantageous location of Llandeilo on the river crossing of the Towy proved decisive leading to the desertion of Dinefwr/Newton. The later history of Llandeilo is sketchy – the town retained its modest size until the late eighteenth century when growth resulted in limited expansion. In the early/mid-nineteenth century new buildings replaced the old, New Road and Crescent Road were constructed, a new river bridge was built to replace the old collapsed one and the main road was driven straight through the large churchyard. In 1856 the coming of the railway resulted in new housing development on the north side of the town.

MORPHOLOGY

It is assumed that the early medieval religious community was located in what is the centre of Llandeilo, but there is no hard evidence for this. Llandeilo grew organically; there is no evidence of it having a formal, planned layout like many of the towns of southwest Wales.

The town is centred on St Teilo's church and its large sub-rectangular churchyard. This is now bisected by the main road through the town, constructed in the early nineteenth century. Prior to this traffic had to go to the north or south around the churchyard. The market place lay on the north side of the churchyard. The wide road of King Street is the residual market place – most of which has been encroached upon by a triangular block of buildings with the now narrow Market Street on its north side. It is unknown when this encroachment took place. The north side of the churchyard would have been the focus of the medieval town, and as only fourteen burgesses were recorded in 1326 it would not have extended much beyond the environs of the market place. The morphology of the town in the later medieval period and early modern period is not clear, but it is likely that by the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries houses had been built on Carmarthen Street, around all sides of the churchyard and on both sides of Bridge Street and Rhos

Maen Street close to the churchyard. Later housing spread further along Bridge Street, Rhos Maen Street and George Hill. Nineteenth and twentieth century housing, commercial properties and religious buildings developed outside the historic core of the town.

Figure 6. Shows the extent of Llandeilo as it may have been c.1320.

BUILDINGS AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES AND MONUMENTS

Scheduled Monuments

There are no scheduled monuments in Llandeilo.

Listed Buildings

There are approximately seventy listed buildings in Llandeilo (Fig. 4). All are grade II. Apart from the medieval elements of St Teilo's Church almost all are late eighteenth and nineteenth century houses, commercial properties and religious buildings reflecting the prosperity of the town in this period.

Conservation Area

The historic core of the town lies within the Llandeilo conservation area (Fig. 4).

Registered Parks and Gardens

There are no registered parks and gardens in the historic core of the town, although the eastern boundary of the Plas Dinefwr registered park and garden skirts the edge of the town.

Registered Historic Landscape

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

Undesignated Historic Environment Assets

There are approximately 150 sites and monuments on the Regional Historic Environment Record. However, many of these are duplicate records of listed buildings or are records of unlisted nineteenth century buildings.

Of note is the record of the site of a chapel in an overgrown garden to the east of the churchyard. It is shown on Ordnance Survey maps (Fig. 2) and is recorded on the historic environment record under number 907. It is now considered that this area of the town was land belonging to Tally Abbey and the erroneous tradition of a chapel at this location grew up over the past few centuries.

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 some building surveys there have been no archaeological investigations in Llandeilo.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL POTENTIAL

The potential archaeological deposits dating to the early medieval period surviving in and around the churchyard is high. However, given that the churchyard is in use and, that houses and shops surround it, opportunities for archaeological investigation are limited. Similarly, medieval and later deposits associated with the town are likely to survive, but again opportunities to investigate them are constrained.

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

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



Figure 1. Location map.

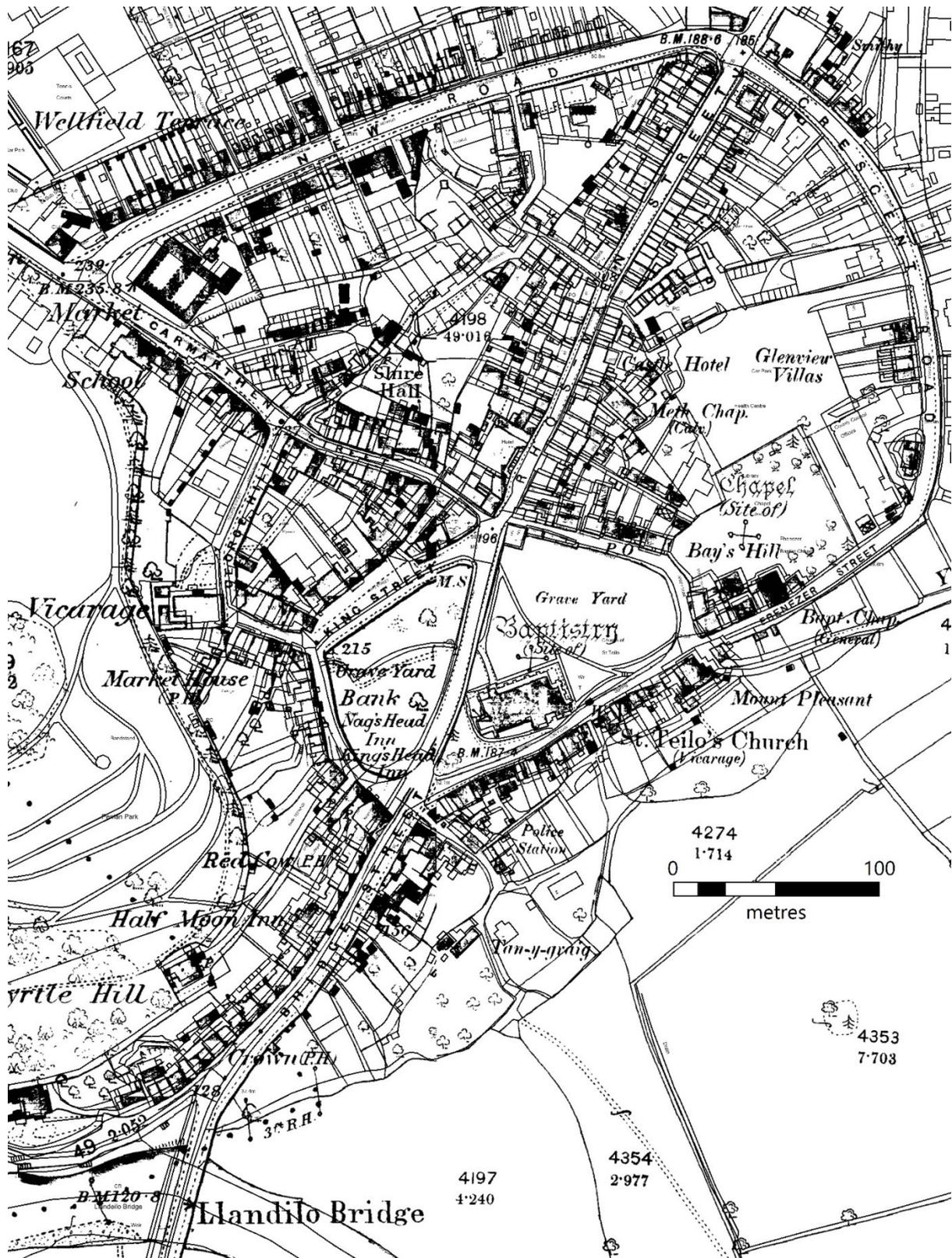


Figure 2. Extract from the Ordnance Survey 1:2500 1st edition map of 1886
 (Carmarthenshire 33.15, 16)



Figure 3. 1828 map of Llandeilo by William Goode. By this date the main road had been driven through the churchyard, New Road is marked but apparently just built and Crescent Road is not in existence (Carmarthen Record Office Derwydd CA52 page 2).



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



Figure 6. Conjectural plan of Llandeilo, c.1320.