

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE MEDIEVAL TOWNS OF SOUTHWEST WALES

LLANDOVERY



(1993 Aerial photograph of Llandovery (Dyfed Archaeological Trust AP93-118.10))

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By

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LLANDOVERY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A small town developed outside Llandovery Castle during the twelfth century. The late thirteenth century was a period of rapid expansion and new burgages were laid out around a triangular-shaped market place. In 1317, 81 burgages were recorded. This may have been the high point of the medieval town and in the sixteenth century it consisted of just one street. It was not until the early nineteenth century that the town expanded. Archaeological investigation in the town consists of a single small evaluation with negative results.

KEY FACTS

Status: 1485 town charter granted. Three annual fairs.

Size: 1317 81 burgages recorded.

Archaeology: One evaluation with negative results.

LOCATION

Llandovery in Carmarthenshire lies on level ground at c.65m above sea level in the Towy valley, immediately upstream of the confluence of Afon Towy and Afon Brân and where the Afon Gwydderig meets the Brân (SN 7675 3427). Llandovery stands at the nexus of route-ways: the Towy valley provides a corridor to the west to Llandeilo, Carmarthen and beyond and the Brân valley gives access to mid-Wales. Roads into north Carmarthenshire follow the upper Towy valley and those to the east the Gwydderig valley.

HISTORY

In the early twelfth century during the Anglo-Norman conquest of southwest Wales Richard Fitz Pons established a castle at Llandovery on the north bank of the Afon Gwydderig, 1km to the southwest of the Roman fort at Llanfair-ar-y-Bryn and 0.4km to the east of the current parish church of Llandingat. It is likely that a settlement rapidly developed outside the castle as in 1185 burgesses are recorded and in 1201 reference is made to a town. Fitz Pons also founded a Benedictine priory cell, probably at Llanfair-ar-y-Bryn, but this was closed by Rhys ap Gruffudd in 1185 when the brethren, who had been interfering with the townsfolk, were expelled. Throughout the thirteenth century the castle was frequently attacked, regularly changing hands between the English and Welsh. Consequently the town had little opportunity to develop until a period of political stability in the late thirteenth century. In 1276 Edward I granted Llandovery to John Giffard. He strengthened the castle and invited English settlers into the town. Rapid expansion took place with the number of burgages increasing from 37 in 1299 to 81 in

1317. By the end of the fourteenth century money from rentals had greatly increased suggesting a growth in population and three annual fairs are recorded. However, although Llandovery was functioning as a borough no charter is recorded until Richard III granted one in 1485. There has never been a church within the borough and there is no documentary evidence to indicate that the town was ever provided with defences. In common with other places in southwest Wales the grant of a charter at a relatively late date seems to have been an attempt to breathe life into a town in severe decline; this had limited success as in 1535 John Leland described Llandovery as 'but one street, and that poorly builded on thatchid houses'. 76 burgages were recorded in 1659, which is close to the maximum recorded in 1317, but only 61 resident burgesses were present in 1661, indicating areas in the town were devoid of buildings. In 1695, when the town had been divided into six wards, little development had occurred outside its medieval core as a survey records: 23 burgesses living in Broad Street, 14 in Queen Street, 11 in Castle Street, 13 in Lower Street and 15 in High Street. The burgesses in High Street were living towards its western end as later documents record fields at its eastern end. Although the town hall was rebuilt in 1752, having been first mentioned in 1592, there was little overall improvement in the town's fortunes for when Benjamin Heath Malkin visited in 1804 he described it as 'the worst in Wales. Its buildings are mean, irregular and unconnected; its streets filthy and disgusting'. However, the first few decades of the nineteenth century witnessed a remarkable upturn in the town's fortunes as in 1833 Samuel Lewis reported Llandovery 'consists principally of two streets meeting nearly at right angles' and that 'the houses at present are well built and of respectable appearance'. The numerous fine late Georgian and Victorian houses attest to the town's increase in status in this period. The population increased significantly in the mid-nineteenth century; the tithe map of c.1840 (Fig. 3) shows newly established houses on both sides of Stone Street, Queen Street, Orchard Street and High Street as far as the Afon Brân. Further expansion had occurred when the Ordnance Survey published the First Edition 1:2500 map in 1888 (Fig. 4). During the twentieth and twenty-first centuries the town expanded in all directions apart from south where the Afon Brân provides a natural boundary.

MORPHOLOGY

Llandovery Castle consists of the remains of a masonry D-shaped tower, gatehouse and curtain wall sitting on a prominent, artificially scarped, natural rocky outcrop with a small inner ward or bailey attached to its east side. Outlying earth banks formerly lay to the southwest. There may originally have been a large outer bailey or enclosure on the level ground immediately to the north (Figs. 2-4), known in the later medieval period as Castle Yard (now a car park); this is the most plausible location for the earliest

settlement, which may have been protected by earthen defences. No surviving archaeological remains were found in the possible outer bailey in a 1991 evaluation (see below).

The earliest settlement probably developed organically outside the castle gates but the late thirteenth/early fourteenth century town was a planned settlement, centred around a triangular-shaped market place (its plan is still clearly visible on modern maps although infilling has obscured the original layout). Burgages would have been laid out on either side of Market Square and Broad Street. Certainly it would appear that the 81 burgages recorded in 1317 could easily be accommodated in Market Square, Broad Street, Castle Street and the close environs. Property boundaries, particularly those on the north side of Market Square and Broad Street still preserve burgage layouts (see Figs. 2-4). Llandingat church stood to the west, isolated from the town. Even by 1695 there had been only modest expansion to the east along the western ends of High Street and Queen Street, with some development east of the Afon Brân where Llandoverly's most famous son, Vicar Pritchard, had built a house.

An interesting feature of the town was the Nant Bawddwr, a stream that frequently featured in medieval and later documents, an open sewer flowing through the centre of the market place and down Broad Street until it was culverted, probably in the early nineteenth century.

Figure 7 shows Llandoverly as it may have been in about 1320.

BUILDINGS AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES AND MONUMENTS

Scheduled Monuments

Llandoverly Castle (CM015) is the only scheduled monument in the town (Fig. 5). The scheduled area of the Roman fort at Llanfair-ar-y-Bryn (CM188) lies 1km to the north of the town.

Listed Buildings

There are 103 listed buildings in Llandoverly (Fig. 5). Apart from the castle and Llandingat Church almost all are nineteenth and twentieth century domestic structures, chapels and street furniture.

Conservation Area

Llandoverly conservation area is extensive and covers the whole of the historic settlement (Fig. 5).

Registered Parks and Gardens

There are no registered parks and gardens in Llandoverly.

Registered Historic Landscape

Llandovery lies in the Towy Valley registered historic landscape. It has been characterised in the Llandovery 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.

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. Individually they do not provide great insight, but collectively they begin to provide a 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. An archaeological evaluation took place in 1991 on the site of the old cattle market immediately to the north of Llandovery Castle in advance of plans to build a new library. The upper fills of the defensive ditch to the castle were investigated at the foot of the castle mound. To the north of the ditch it would seem that construction of a cattle market in the early twentieth century had removed earlier archaeological deposits, assuming they had existed. The library was not built, instead the area was turned over to a public car park. Reference: Dyfed Archaeological Trust 1991 (25701).
2. A small-scale excavation was carried out in 2000 in advance of the erection of a memorial to Llywelyn ap Gruffydd Fychan in the castle. Only a very shallow excavation was required; nothing of archaeological interest was noted. Reference: Cambria Archaeology 2000 (41364).

ARCHAEOLOGICAL POTENTIAL

Llandovery has high potential for addressing some of the key agenda items for research into the medieval period, including town plantation and castle building. It also has the potential to address post-medieval research theme on settlements (towns).

Negative results were returned from the only archaeological investigations in the town. These were on the site of the old cattle market; it is possible that market construction had removed earlier archaeological deposits.

Surviving archaeological deposits in the remainder of the town have not been examined and indeed opportunities to do so are limited as street frontages present an almost unbroken façade on domestic and commercial buildings, many of them with listed status. Having said that, anywhere on Castle Street, Market Square, Broad Street and close environs has the potential for archaeological deposits from the twelfth/thirteenth century to the modern period to survive. Along the High Street deposits from the later medieval period to the modern period may survive.

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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>

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

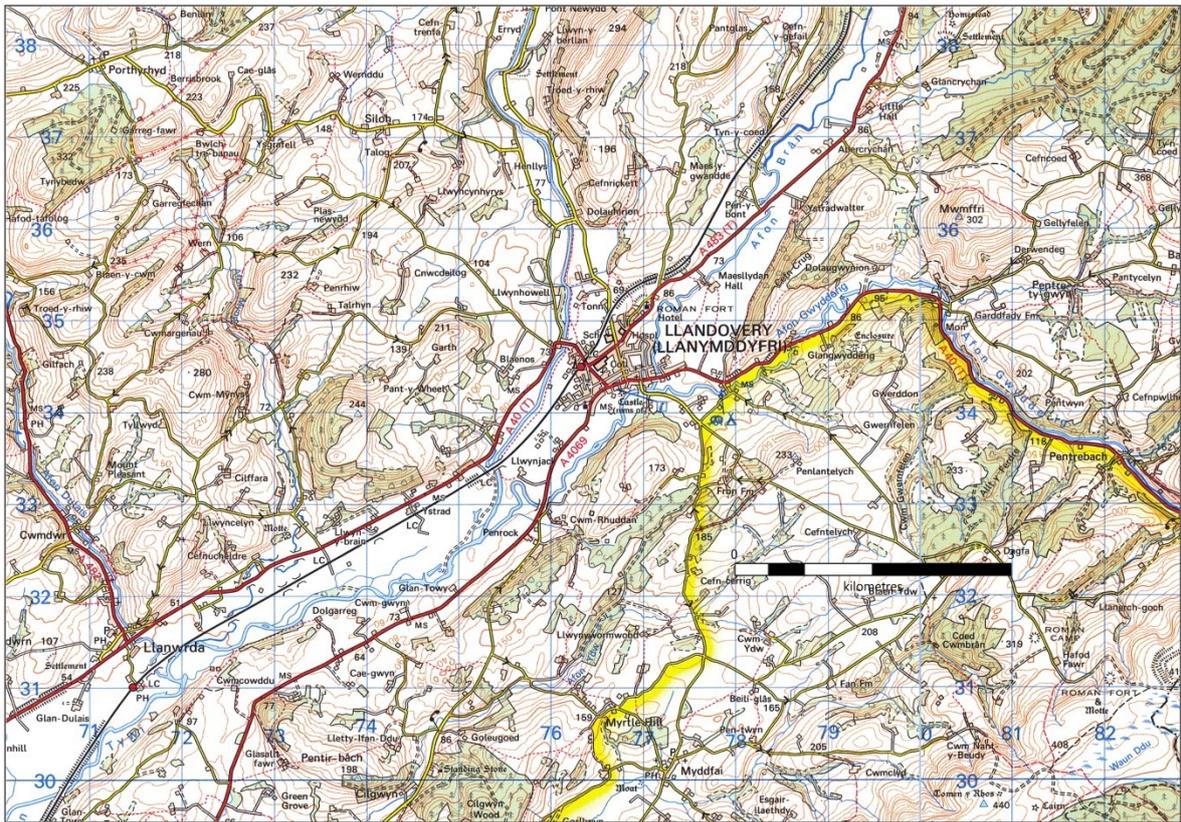


Figure 1. Location map.

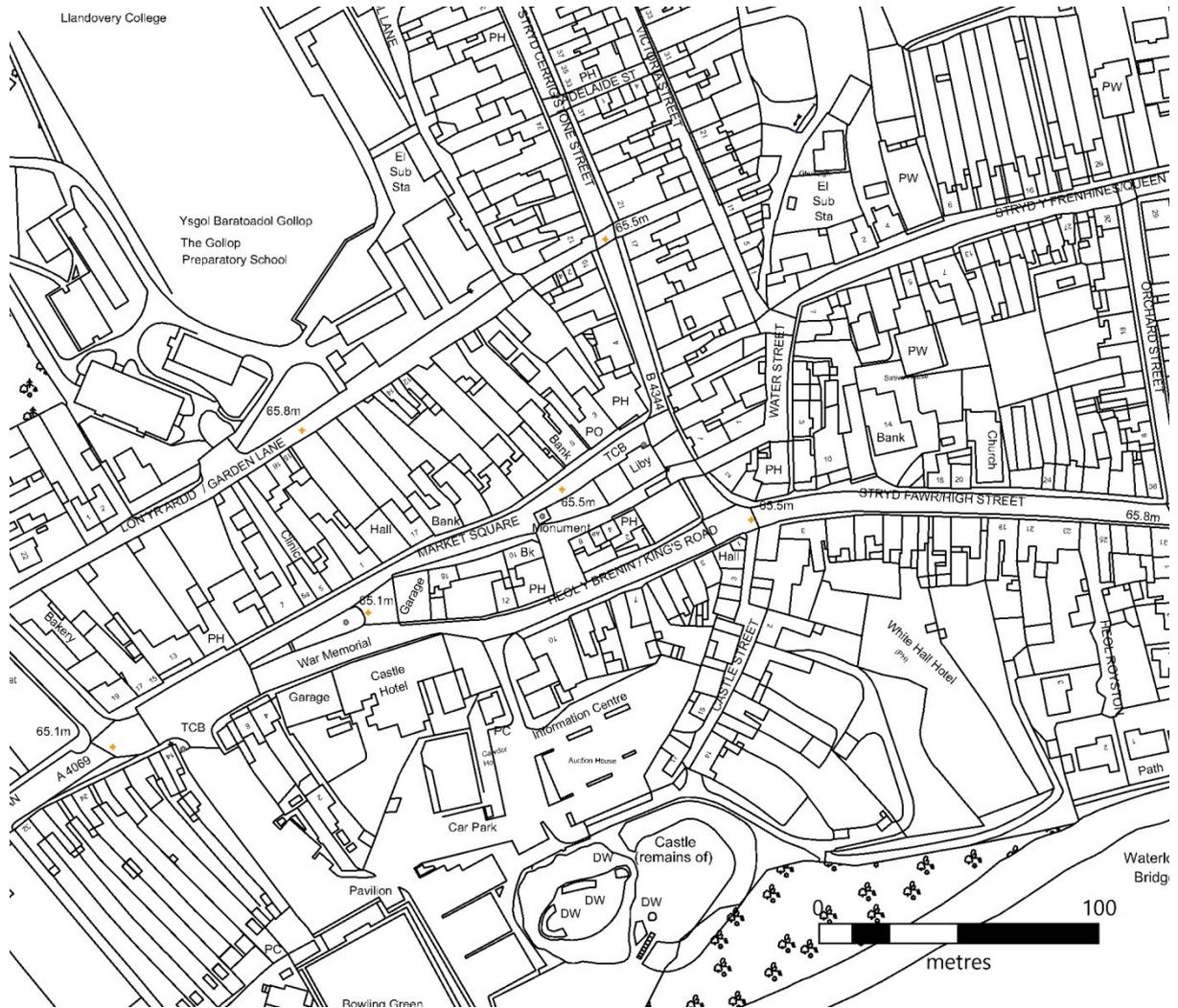


Figure 2. Modern Ordnance Survey map of the historic core of Llandoverly.



Figure 3. Extract from the 1840 tithe map of Llandingat parish. Note Llandingat Church lying to the west of the town.

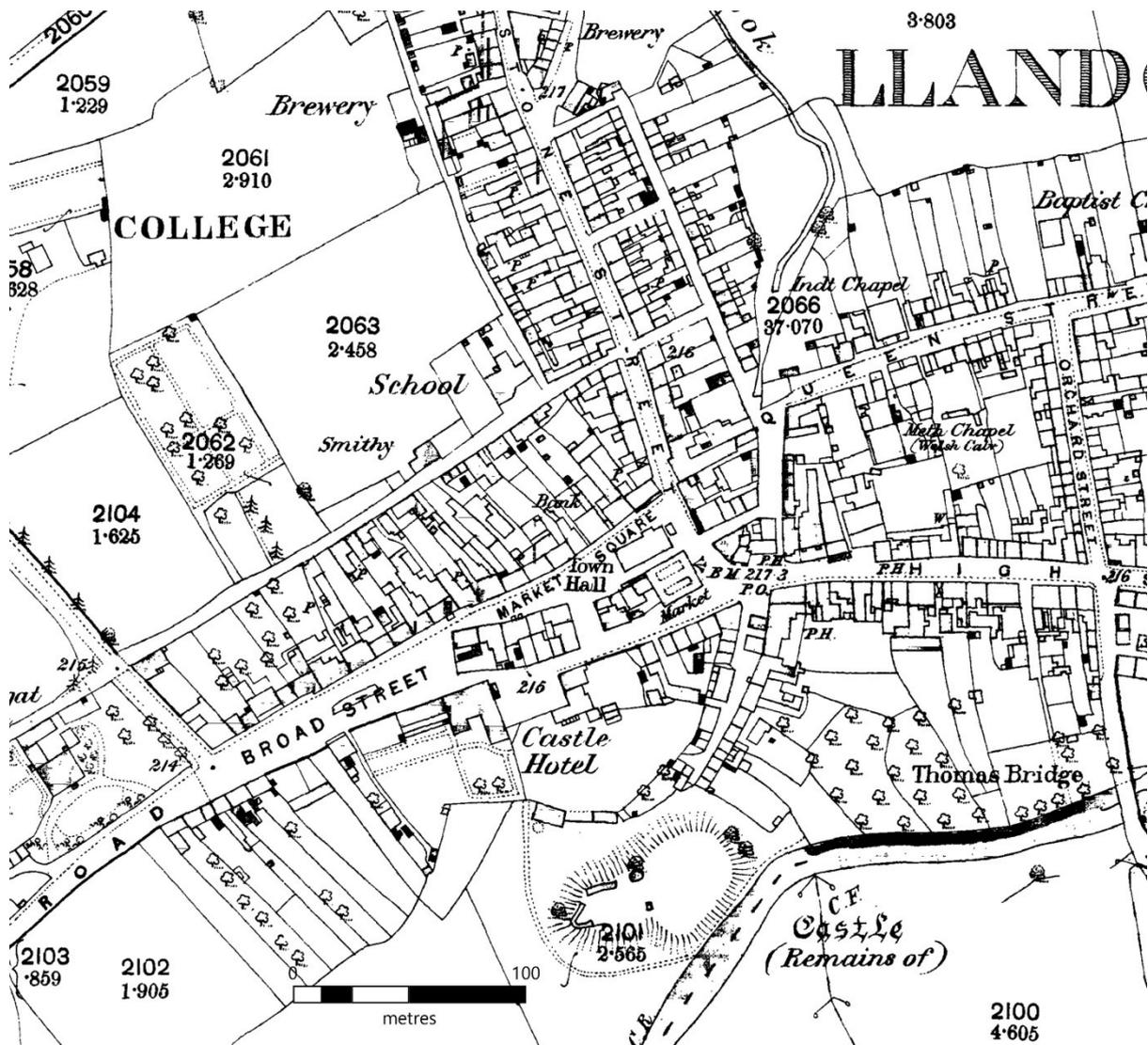


Figure 4. Extract from the Ordnance Survey 1:2500 1st edition map of 1888 (Carmarthenshire 18.13).

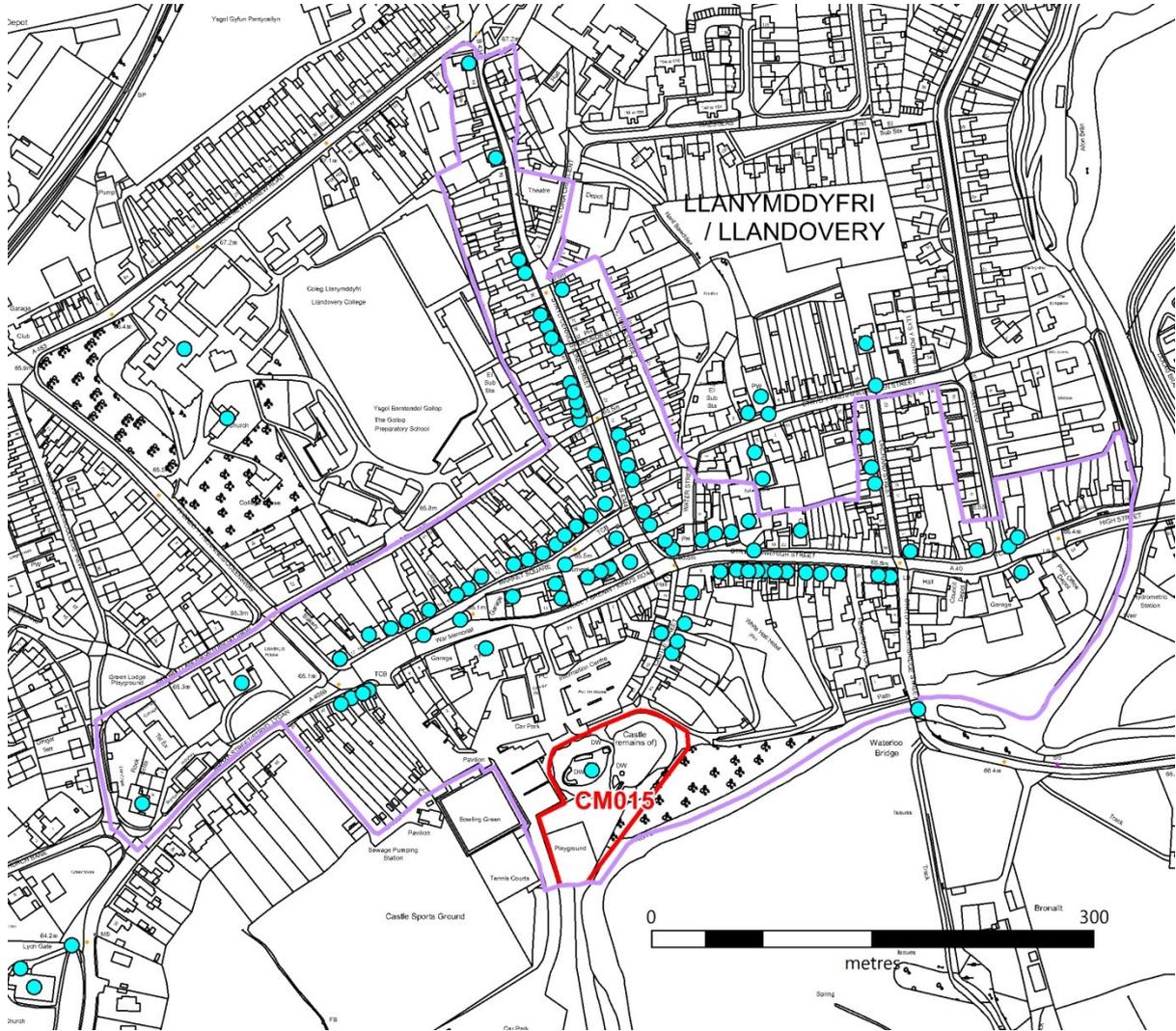


Figure 5. Listed buildings (blue circles), scheduled monuments (outlined in red) and the conservation area (outlined in purple).

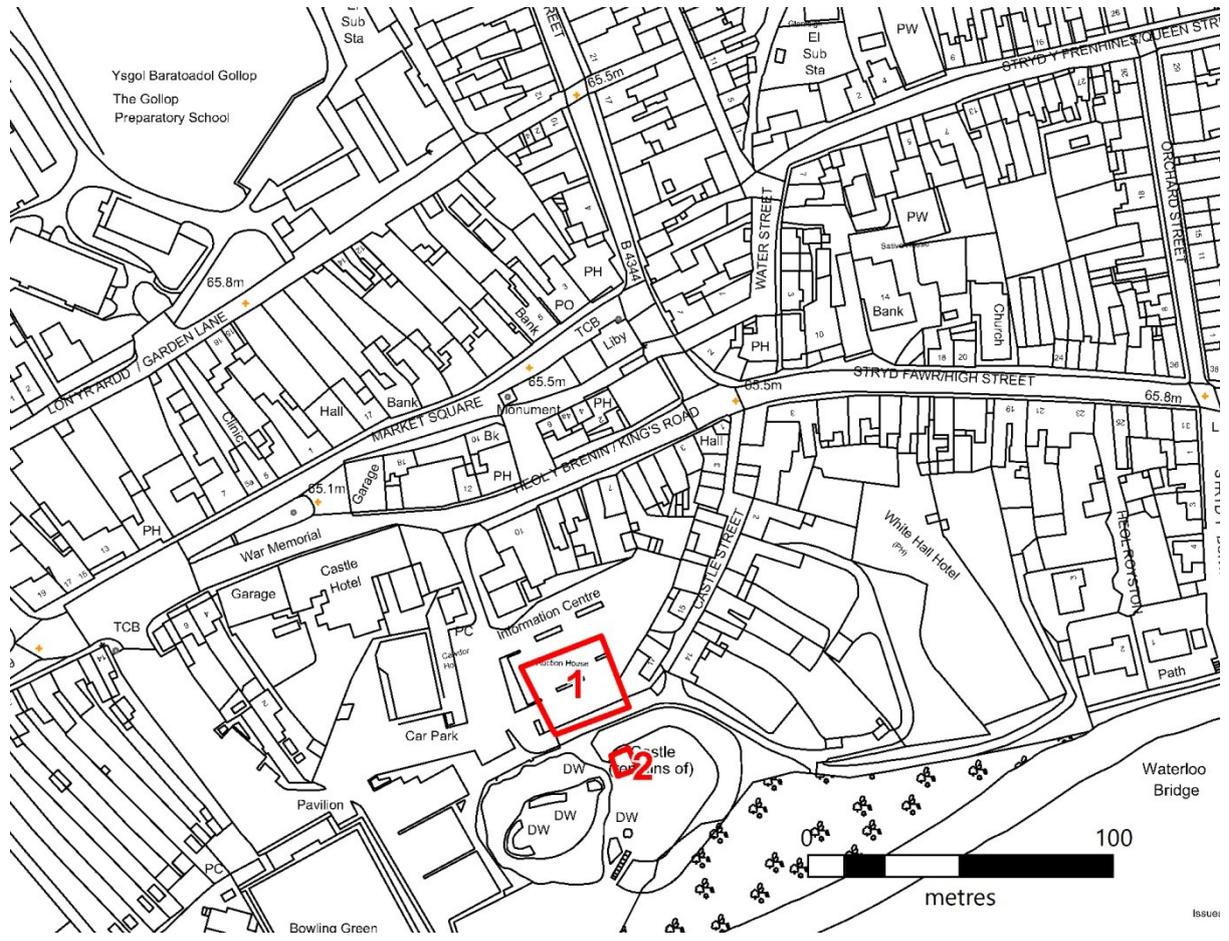


Figure 6. Location of archaeological interventions.

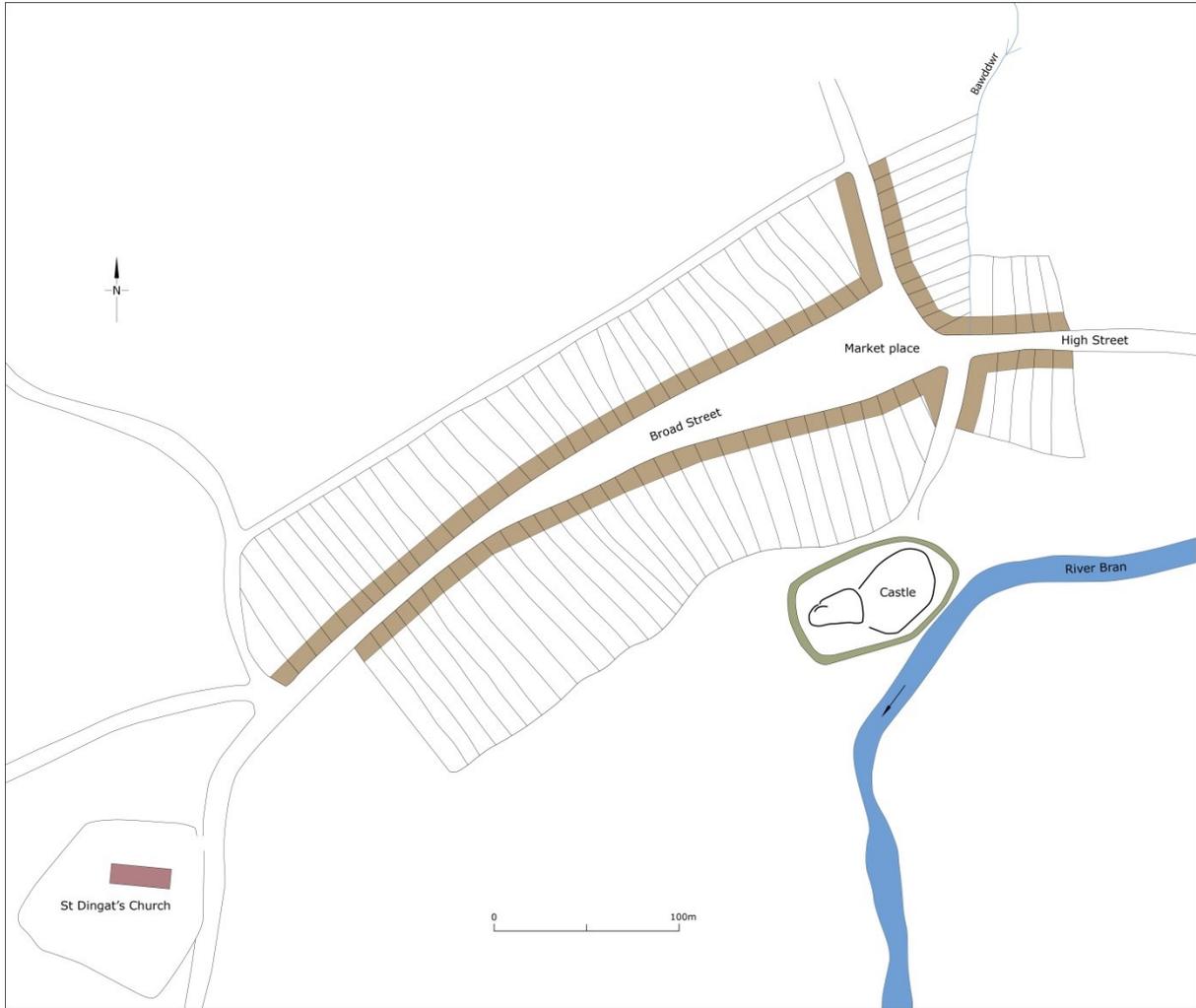


Figure 7. Conjectural plan of Llandovery at its maximum extent in the medieval period, c.1320.