

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE MEDIEVAL TOWNS OF SOUTHWEST WALES

LLANELLI



1985 aerial photograph of Llanelli (DAT AP85-47.34)

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By

K Murphy

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Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Ymddiriedolaeth Archaeolegol Dyfed Cyf
Corner House, 6 Stryd Caerfyrddin, Llandeilo,
Sir Gaerfyrddin SA19 6AE
Ffon: Ymholiadau Cyffredinol 01558 823121
Adran Rheoli Treftadaeth 01558 823131
Ebost: info@dyfedarchaeology.org.uk
Gwefan: www.archaeolegdyfed.org.uk

Dyfed Archaeological Trust Limited
Corner House, 6 Carmarthen Street, Llandeilo,
Carmarthenshire SA19 6AE
Tel: General Enquiries 01558 823121
Heritage Management Section 01558 823131
Email: info@dyfedarchaeology.org.uk
Website: www.dyfedarchaeology.org.uk

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LLANELLI

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The medieval history of Llanelli is obscure. A church is recorded, St Elli's, in the eleventh century, and it is assumed that a settlement developed around it following the Anglo-Norman conquest of the region in the early twelfth century. However, no markets or fairs are recorded and it is only in the seventeenth century that documents refer to Llanelli as a borough. Whatever the status of medieval Llanelli, it would have been small with houses clustered around the church. However, the archaeological potential of Llanelli was demonstrated by investigations during the restoration of Llanelly House, which revealed stratified archaeological deposits going back to at least the Tudor period.

KEY FACTS

Status: Llanelli was not a town in the medieval period.

Size: Unknown, but small.

Archaeology: Work in Llanelly House revealed post-medieval archaeology.

LOCATION

The historic settlement of Llanelli lies on the north side of the River Leidi in southeast Carmarthenshire where the river meanders across a wide coastal plain (SN 506 005). The centre of the town is now 1.3 km from the sea, but in the medieval period the Lledi may have been a tidal inlet as far inland as Llanelli's historic core.

HISTORY

Nineteenth and twentieth century industry dominate the history of Llanelli and obscure, both historically and physically, its origins in the medieval period.

There is a late eleventh century reference to St Elli's church in the Book of Llandaff, but nothing is known of an associated settlement, if indeed there was one. The Anglo-Normans established a castle at Carnwyllion, probably in the early twelfth century, during their conquest of the region. Carnwyllion Castle was established on a site known as 'Old Castle', 700m to the west of St Elli's parish church and now mostly submerged by the waters of a reservoir. The first record of the castle was in 1190 when it was destroyed by the Welsh. It was destroyed again in 1215. The castle drops out of history at this date. There is no known medieval history of Llanelli; it was not granted a town charter and no known grants of rights to hold a market or fair are known.

In the 1530s the antiquary John Leland called it 'a village' and a 1609-13 survey records 59 freeholders in the borough of Llanelli. Later documents also refer to Llanelli as a

borough, but as late as the early nineteenth century only 51 houses were recorded. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards Llanelli rapidly expanded.

MORPHOLOGY

Eighteenth and early nineteenth century maps show approximately 50 houses clustered around St Elli's churchyard (Fig. 2). On these maps houses are shown on Church Street, Bridge Street, Thomas Street and Wind Street, all on the north side of the meandering River Lledi (this is now culverted). The substantial Llanelly House is shown immediately to the south of the churchyard with substantial gardens to its south.

It is assumed that the medieval settlement occupied a similar location to the houses shown on eighteenth and nineteenth century maps, but was probably not so large. However, its exact location remains unclear.

The large churchyard, 125m east/west and 70m north/south has retained much of its size and shape since the first map depiction of it in the mid-eighteenth century, although it may have once extended further to the southeast as human bones have been discovered close to Falcon Bridge. Twentieth-century road-widening and car park construction to the north and west of the churchyard required the demolition of houses and other buildings and with them evidence of medieval and later archaeological deposits, if indeed there were any at these locations (Figs 3 and 4).

BUILDINGS AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES AND MONUMENTS

Scheduled Monuments

There are no scheduled monuments in Llanelli's medieval core.

Listed Buildings

There are approximately 18 listed buildings in the historic core of Llanelli (Fig. 4). Four of these relate to Llanelly House, listed grade I. St Elli's Church is grade II*. The remainder are grade II and consist of nineteenth and twentieth century buildings and street furniture.

Conservation Area

The historic core of Lanelli lies in Llanelli Conservation Area (Fig. 4).

Registered Parks and Gardens

There are no registered parks and gardens in Llanelli.

Registered Historic Landscape

Llanelli is not in a registered historic landscape.

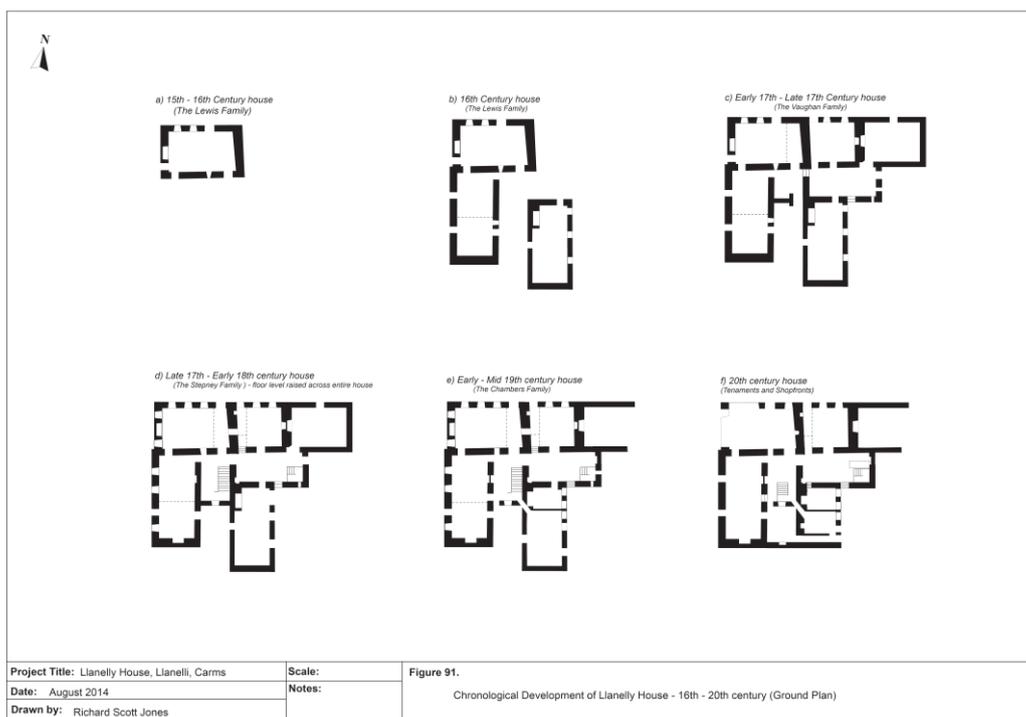
Undesignated Historic Environment Assets

There are approximately 30 site and monuments recorded on the regional Historic Environment Record. However, 18 of these are duplicates of the listed buildings and the others are of unlisted nineteenth century and more recent buildings and structures (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 (Fig. 5).

1. Archaeological excavations during the restoration of Llanelly House, 2009-14, revealed the Tudor and later floors and walls of the house up to 0.8m below modern floors. A complete building record of the house was produced during restoration. The work demonstrated that Llanelly House developed from a modest sixteenth-century dwelling. Reference: Jones 2014 (112706).



Chronological development of Llanelly House (from Jones 2014).

ARCHAEOLOGICAL POTENTIAL

Llanelli has limited potential for addressing medieval research themes, but has the potential to address the post-medieval research theme on settlements.

Intensive archaeological investigations and recording during restoration of Llanelly House have demonstrated that archaeological deposits survive up 0.8m below the present

ground surface, and perhaps deeper. The earliest recognised deposits were of Tudor date, but earlier ones may survive at greater depth. Similar deposits probably survive beneath other buildings to the south and east of the church.

To the west and north of the church road widening and other modern developments will have damaged or destroyed archaeological deposits.

Figure 7 shows the probably extent of Llanelli in the early fourteenth century.

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Soulsby I N and Jones D 1977. The archaeological implications of redevelopment in the historic towns of the Borough of Llanelli, 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>

Coflein <https://coflein.gov.uk/en>

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

Research framework for the Archaeology of Wales

<https://www.archaeoleg.org.uk/areasouthwest.html>

<https://www.oldmapsonline.org/map/britishlibrary/002OSD000000021U00144000>

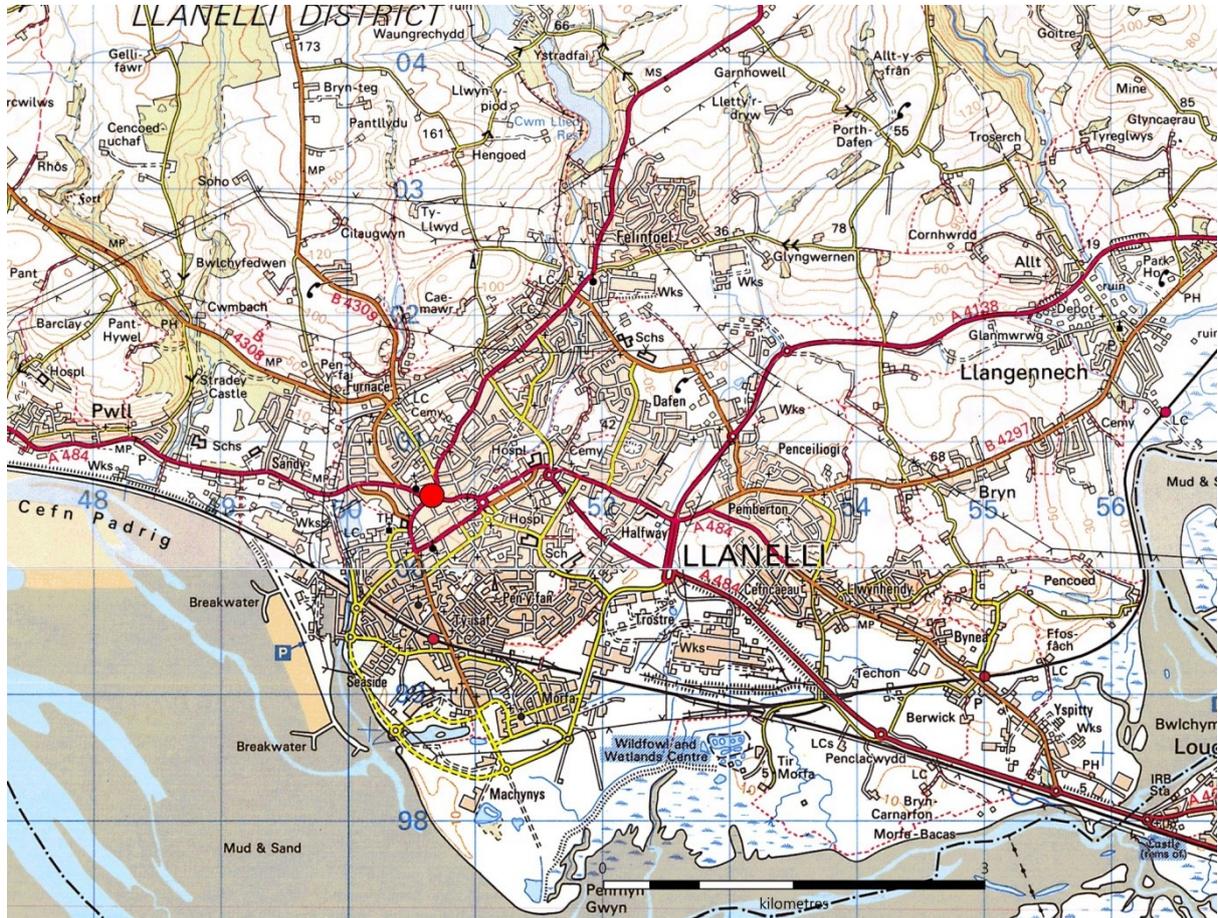


Figure 1. Location map.

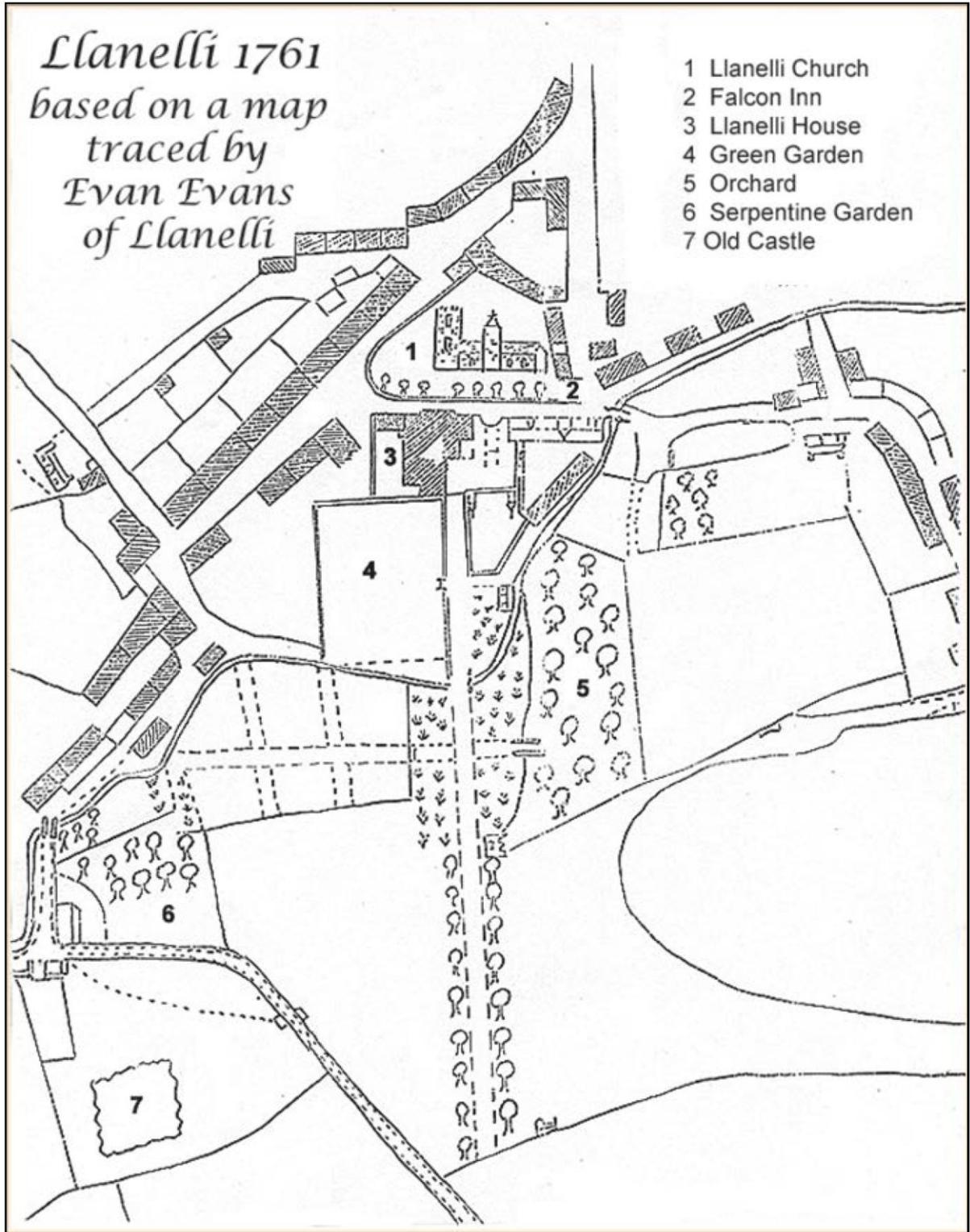


Figure 2. 1761 map of Llanelli, reproduced from Jones 2014.



Figure 3. Extract from the 1889 Ordnance Survey 1:2500 1st Edition map (Carmarthenshire 1880 58.07).

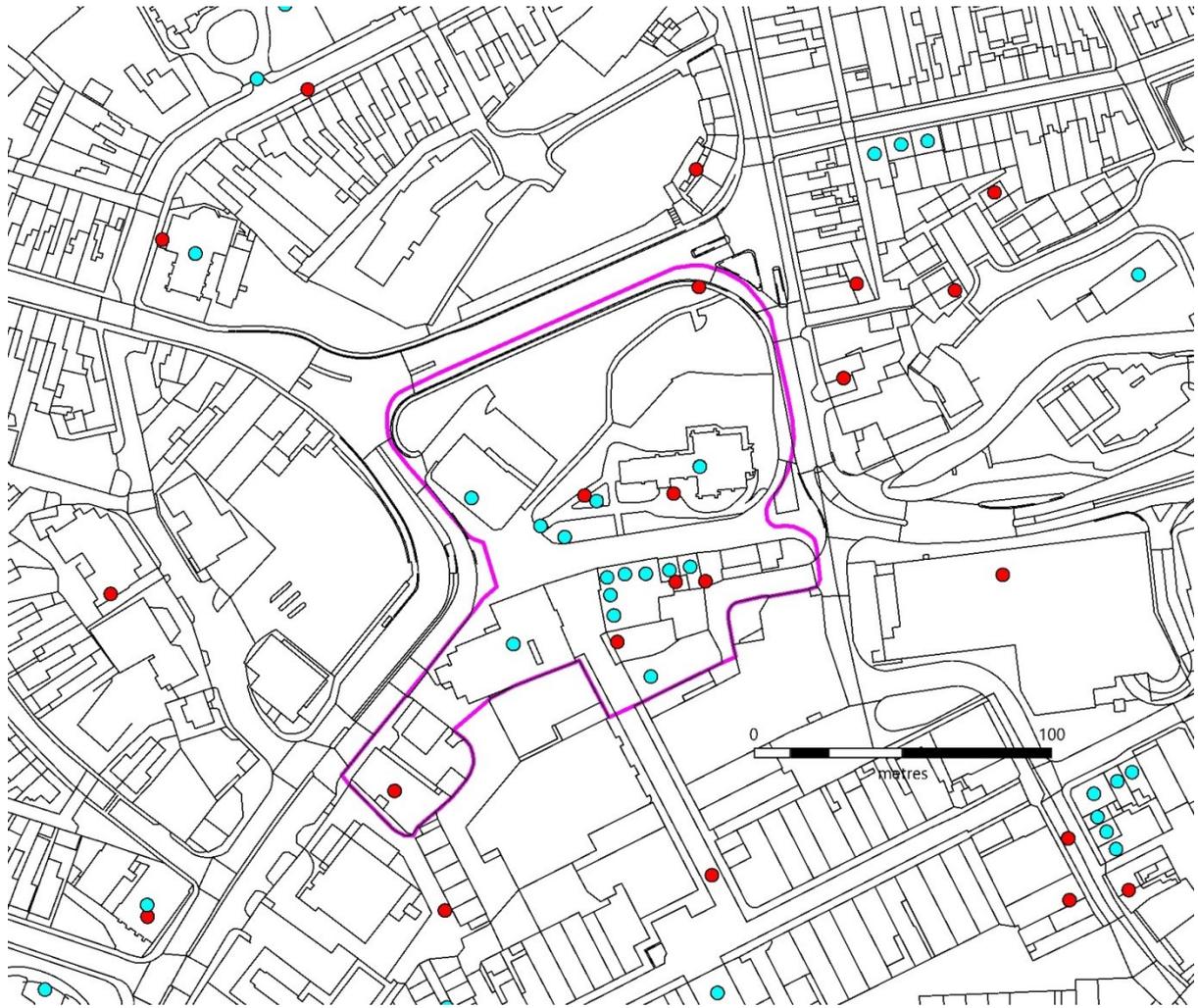


Figure 4. Listed buildings (blue circles), HER sites (red circles) and the conservation area (purple outline).



Figure 5. Archaeological interventions

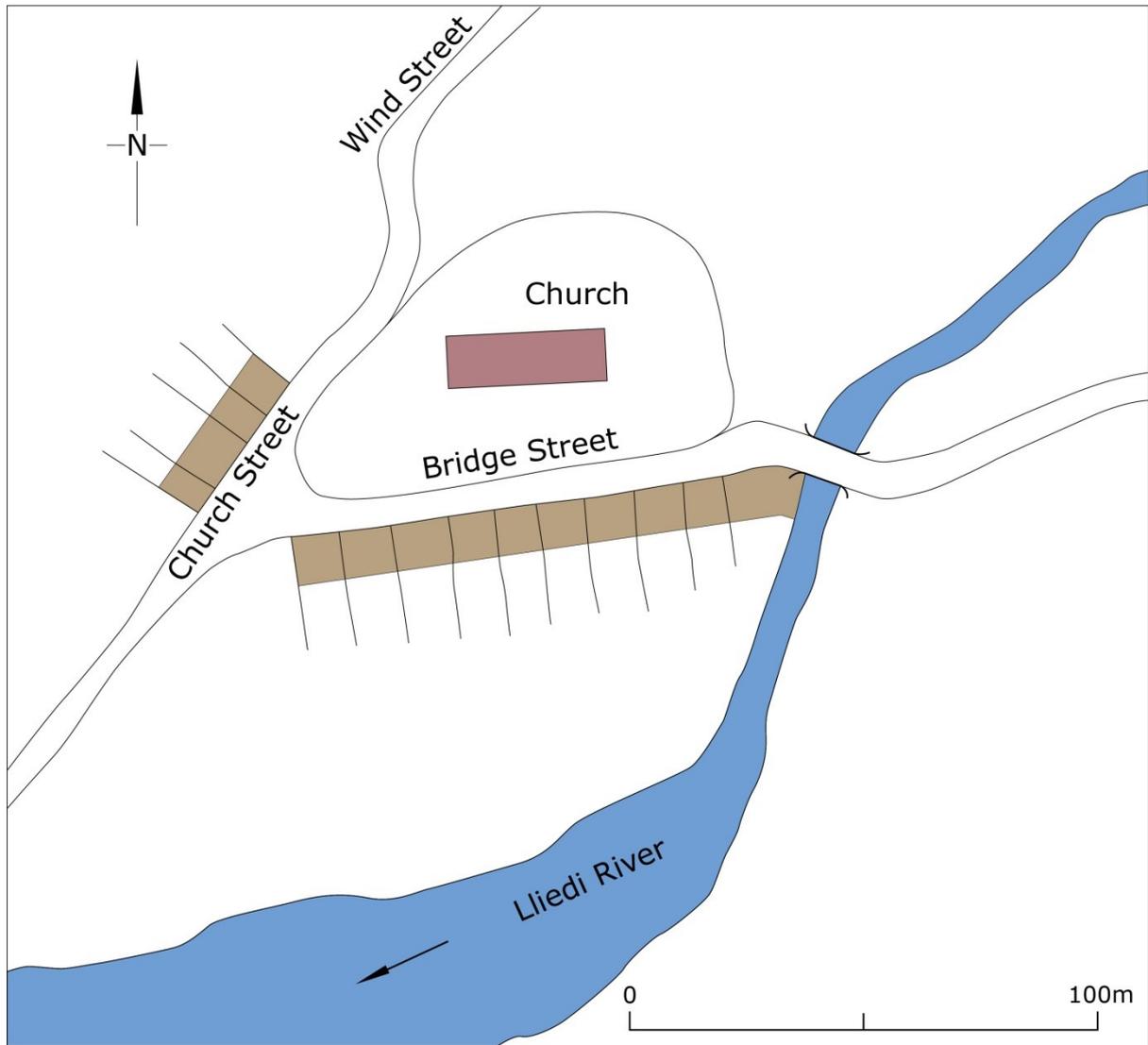


Figure 7. Schematic plan of Llanelli as it may have been in the early fourteenth century.