

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE MEDIEVAL TOWNS OF SOUTHWEST WALES

NARBERTH



1988 aerial photograph of Narberth (DAT AP88-11.4)

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By

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NARBERTH

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Narberth was a small and relatively insignificant medieval settlement. Its origins are obscure, but it probably developed organically in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in the vicinity of the church and castle. A fair is recorded in 1282, but a market was not granted until 1652. The granting of a market was a spur for development and the town grew rapidly during the seventeenth and subsequent centuries.

KEY FACTS

Status: Annual fair. No town charter.

Size: Unknown, but small.

Archaeology: Limited to a watching brief.

LOCATION

Narberth lies in central Pembrokeshire (Fig. 1) at on the north side of a tributary of the Eastern Cleddau at about 90m above sea level (SN 110 145). To the south land falls away steeply into the valley: to the north land rises gently. The main Tenby to Cardigan north/south road, the A478, runs through Narberth. The town sits within a pastoral dominated agricultural landscape.

HISTORY

There is some confusion concerning the foundation of Narberth Castle. Some authorities attribute its foundation to Sir Stephen Perrot in the late eleventh century, but there are no documentary references to support this. Further confusion is added to the mix by the tradition that the original 'Narberth Castle' was Sentence Castle, Templeton, and was not relocated to Narberth until the thirteenth century. Both of these assertions are incorrect.

Narberth district – Arberth in Welsh – referred to in 'The Mabinogion' would have been a pre Anglo-Norman administrative centre. The location of this is unknown but the site of Narberth Castle is a contender. The Anglo-Normans founded a castle at Narberth sometime after 1093 during their conquest of southwest Wales. The first reference to the castle is in 1116 when resurgent Welsh forces burnt and apparently took it. The early castle would have been built of earth and timber and not translated into stone until the mid-thirteenth century. In common with other castles in southwest Wales Narberth Castle changed hands several times during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. By the early fifteenth century it was in a state of decay.

There is no evidence that the parish church of St Andrew (across a valley 140m to the west of the castle) is on a pre Anglo-Norman religious site - it is likely to be a twelfth/thirteenth century foundation, perhaps having been relocated from a site close to the castle.

It is assumed that a settlement developed between the castle and the church (Figs. 2-4) during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, but there are no historical sources to support this. By the late thirteenth century an annual fair is recorded, but virtually nothing else is known and it is assumed that Narberth was a small and relatively insignificant settlement and that like many similar sized settlements in southwest Wales it contracted from the mid-fourteenth century. It would seem that when the mansion Plâs Farm was built at the western end of Church Street in the early 1500s there were few adjacent houses. In 1532 there were only 30 burgages and four years later John Leland called it 'a poore village'. It is not until the seventeenth century that Narberth's fortunes increased. A weekly market was granted in 1652; this was so successful that Tenby burgesses petitioned the King to shut it down. The town expanded rapidly to the north and east in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with further expansion in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

MORPHOLOGY

Narberth Castle lies on a rocky knoll at the southern end of the town. From the castle land falls away steeply to the south (Figs 2-4). A minor valley lies to the west of the castle, separating the castle from the church, up which runs the main north/south road from Tenby to Cardigan, the A478. The parish church of St Andrew lies on the southwest side of the town at the southwest end of Church Street. The compact group of streets, Church Street, Castle Street, Market Street and Picton Place, to the east and northeast of the church are likely to have formed the core of the medieval settlement, with a small market place either at the triangular shaped junction of Church Street and Picton Place or at Market Square at the east end of Church Street, although this latter location is more likely to have been the result of seventeenth century expansion of the town.

Development up High Street and along St James Street/Sheep Street is likely to date to the seventeenth century and later.

BUILDINGS AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES AND MONUMENTS

Scheduled Monuments

There is one scheduled monument in Narberth (Fig. 5):

Narberth Castle (PE040). The castle is also a listed building Grade I.

Listed Buildings

There are 40 listed buildings in Narberth (Fig. 5):

Apart from the castle which is Grade I all are Grade II and consist of domestic and commercial properties, religious buildings and street furniture.

Conservation Area

Narberth conservation area comprises the whole of the historic core of the town (Fig. 5).

Registered Parks and Gardens

There are no registered parks and gardens in Narberth.

Registered Historic Landscape

Narberth is not in a registered historic landscape.

Undesignated Historic Environment Assets

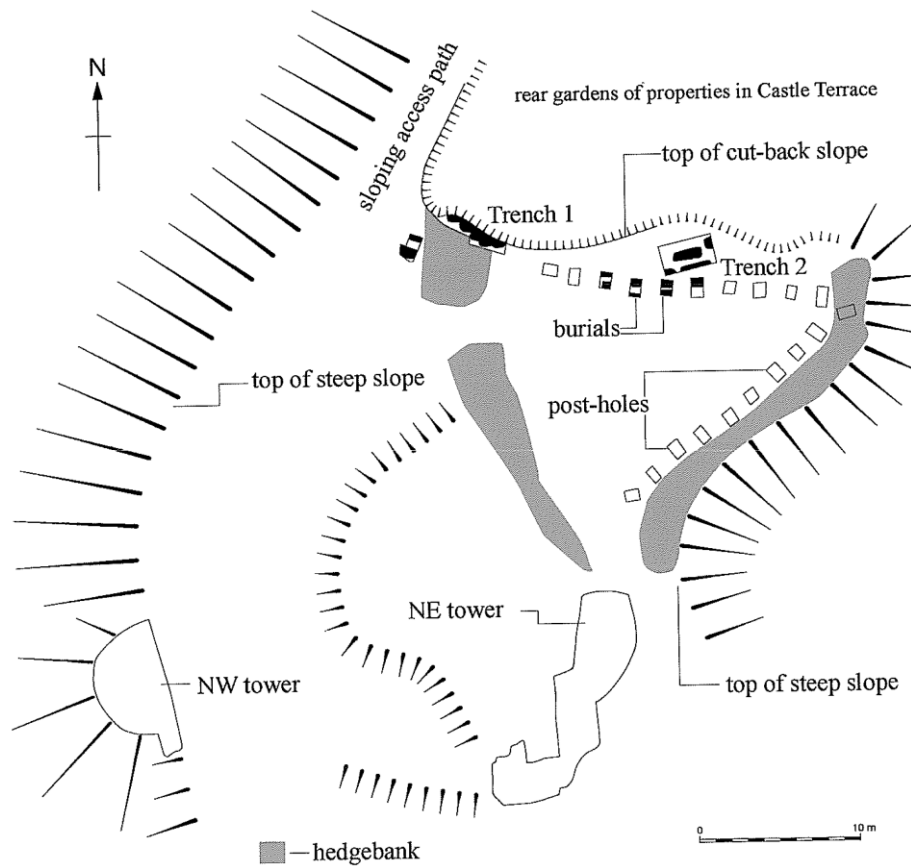
In addition to the castle and parish church there are approximately 20 undesignated assets in Narberth listed on the Dyfed Historic Environment Record. (Fig. 6). These consist almost entirely of buildings or street furniture not considered worthy of listed status.

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. 7).

Numbers in parentheses below refer to records in the Dyfed Historic Environment Record.

1. In 2001 a cemetery of least 20 east/west aligned burials were discovered 30m to the north of the standing remains of Narberth Castle. Intercutting graves indicate the cemetery was in use for some time. Pottery and a single radiocarbon date demonstrate a twelfth/thirteenth century date for burials. Three further burials were excavated in 2003 a few metres to the west indicating a cemetery of some extent. It is almost certain that at least some of the cemetery was removed when the steep slope to the north was cut back during building work on the houses to the north. The excavators tentatively suggested that the cemetery marked the location of the church prior to its relocation at its present site in the mid-thirteenth century, perhaps when the castle was rebuilt in stone. References: Jamieson and Ludlow 2003; Murphy and Crane 2002 (49038 and 43926).



Plan showing the 2001 excavation of the burials. The three burials found in 2003 lay on the 'sloping access path'.

2. A watching brief was maintained in 2005-06 during clearance of two vacant building plots on the south side of Church Street (nos 14 and 15). Houses, probably of nineteenth century date formerly occupied the plots; these had been demolished many years prior to the watching brief. No definite evidence for medieval use of the site was recorded. A sunken path, probably of seventeenth or eighteenth century date pre-dated the houses, perhaps indicating the plots had been left vacant for a considerable amount of time. Reference: Crane 2006 (55175).



Numbers 14 and 15 Church Street during the watching brief.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL POTENTIAL

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

The extent of the medieval town can only be conjectured – Figure 8 shows what may have been its maximum extent in the early fourteenth century. There are well-preserved archaeological deposits immediately outside the castle. However, elsewhere the archaeological potential is unknown and given that modern street frontages present an almost unbroken façade in the core of the historic settlement it is possible that medieval deposits will have been disturbed during house and other building construction in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

REFERENCES

Published and unpublished

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

Soulsby I and Jones D 1975. The archaeological implications of redevelopment in the historic towns in S. Pembrokeshire District, 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>



Figure 1. Location map.

NARBERTH.

enlargement of 1835 Municipal Corporations Boundaries Map

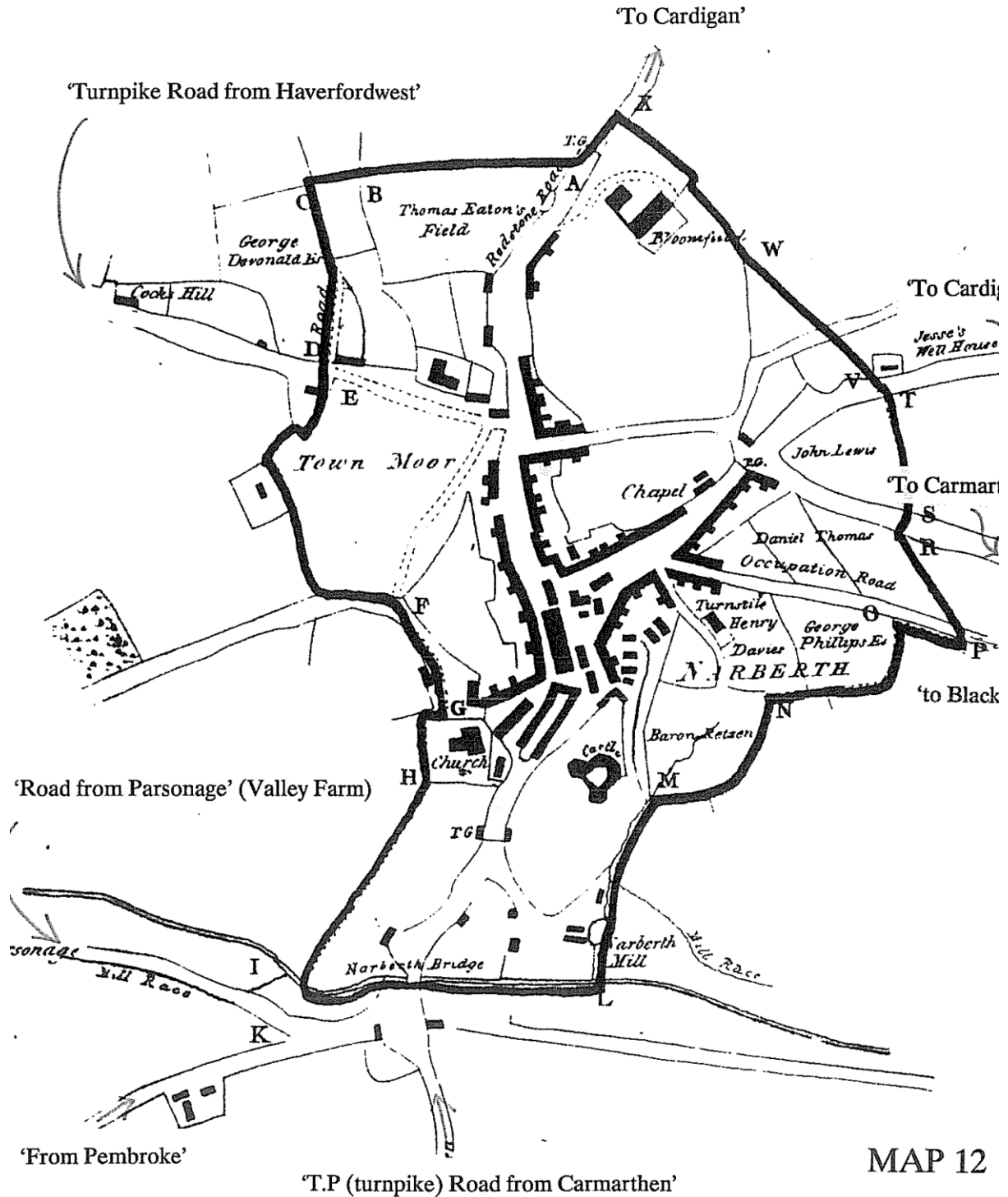


Figure 2. 1835 map of Narberth, from Dyfed Archaeological Trust 1992.

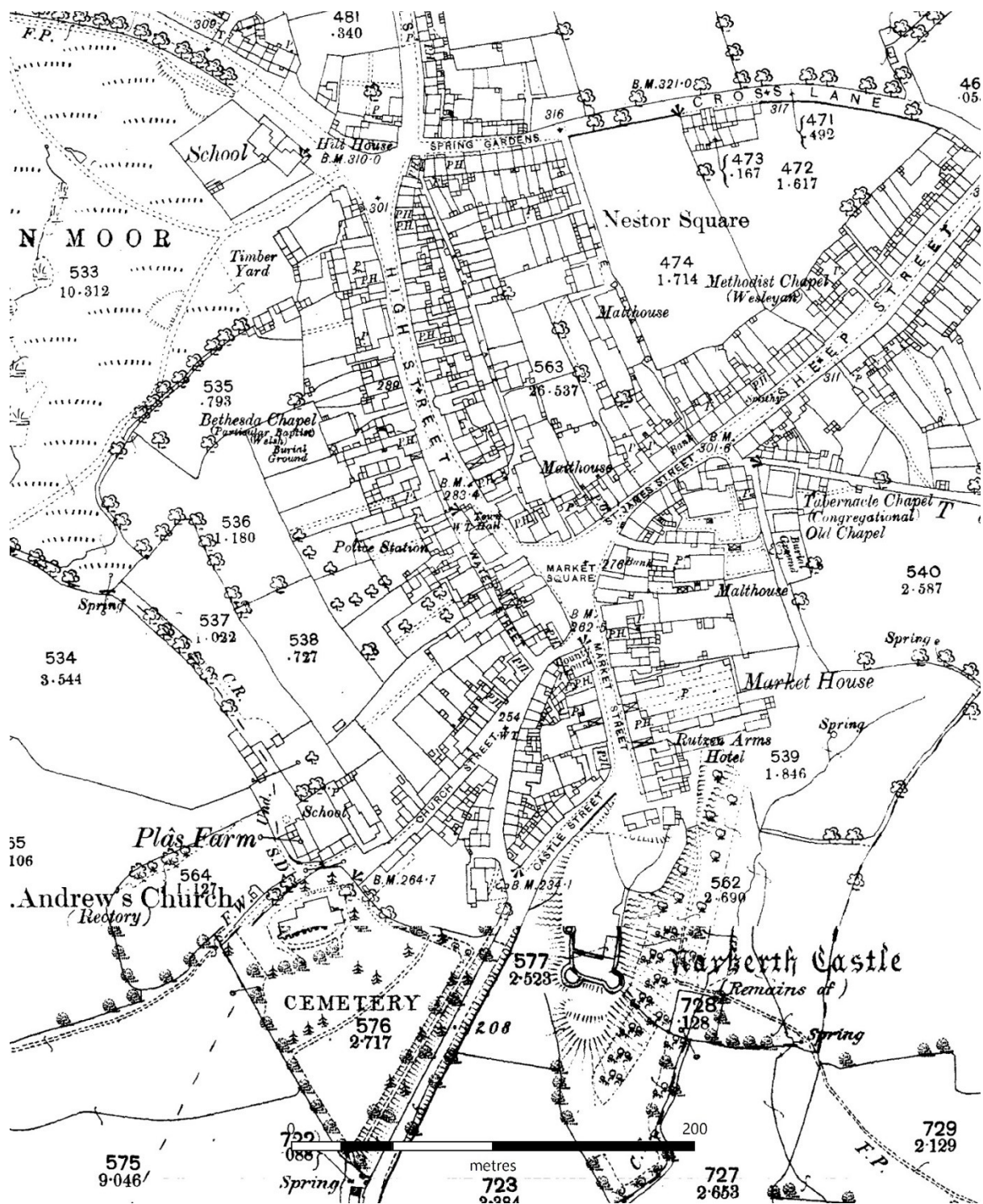


Figure 3. Extract from the 1889 Ordnance Survey 1:2500 1st Edition map (Pembs 1st maps 1889 29.06 and 29.10).

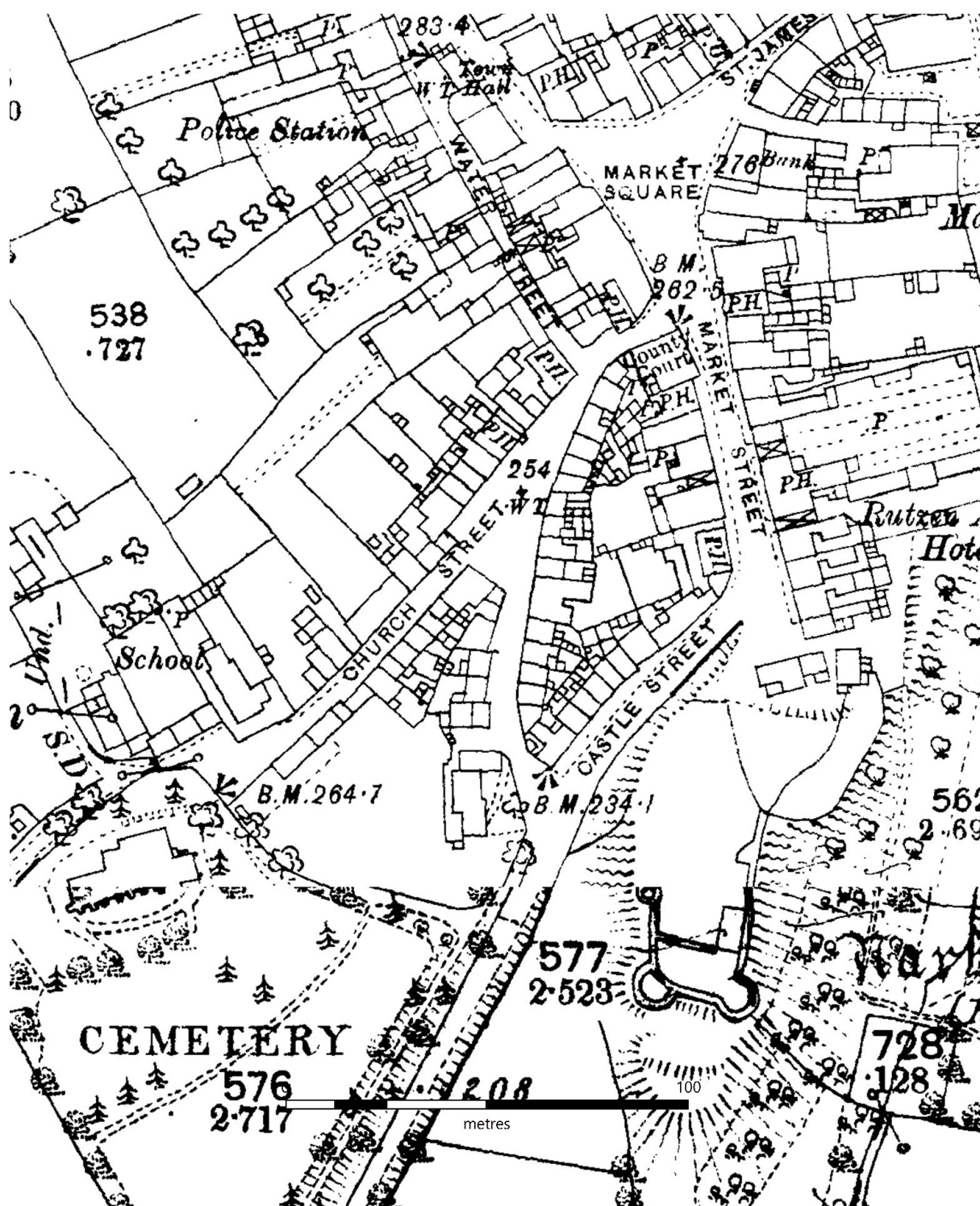


Figure 4. Extract from the 1889 Ordnance Survey 1:2500 1st Edition map showing the historic core of Narberth (Pembs 1st maps 1889 29.06 and 29.10).

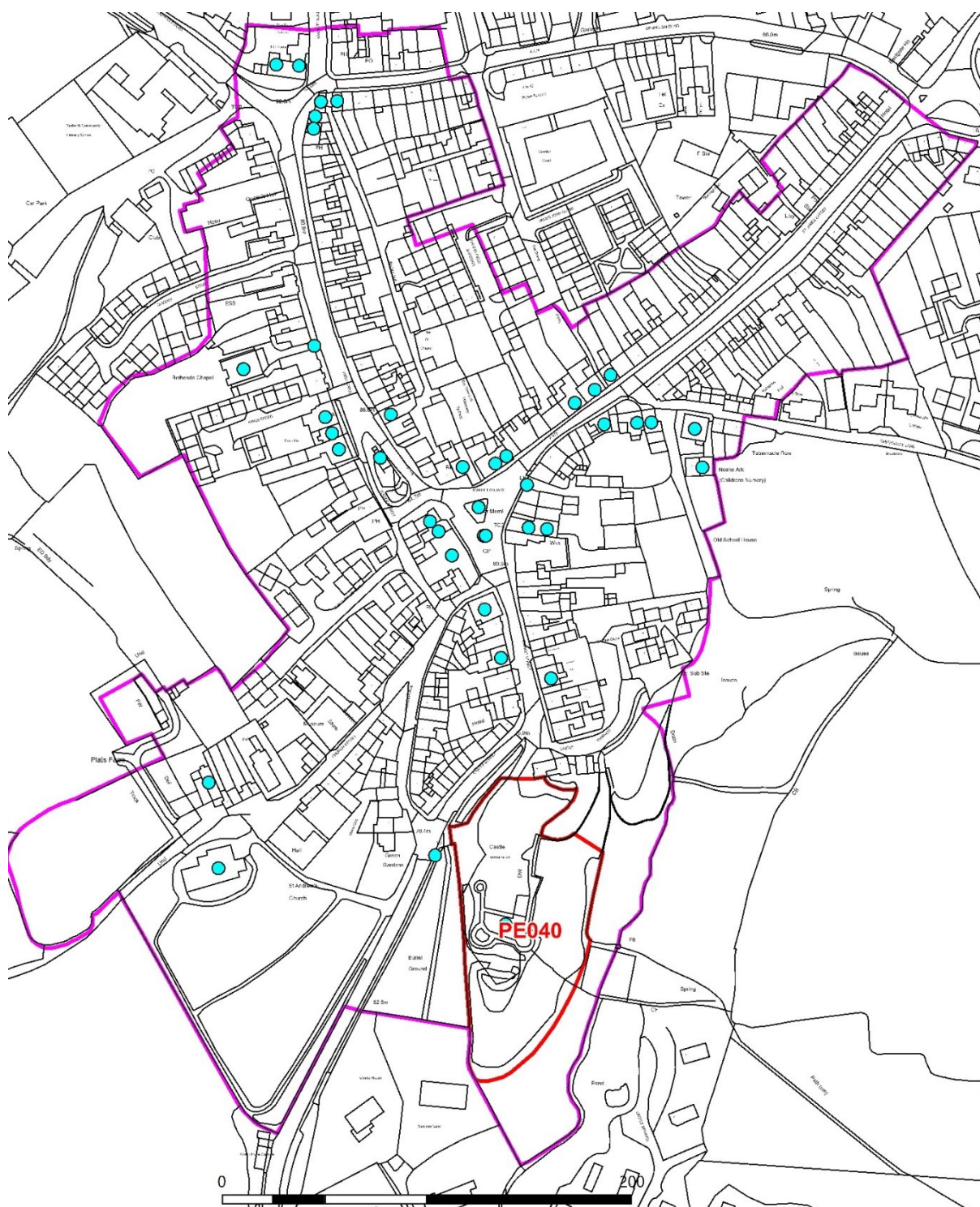


Figure 5. Listed buildings (blue circles), scheduled monuments (outlined in red) and the conservation area (outlined in purple).



Figure 6. HER records.



Figure 7. Location of archaeological interventions.

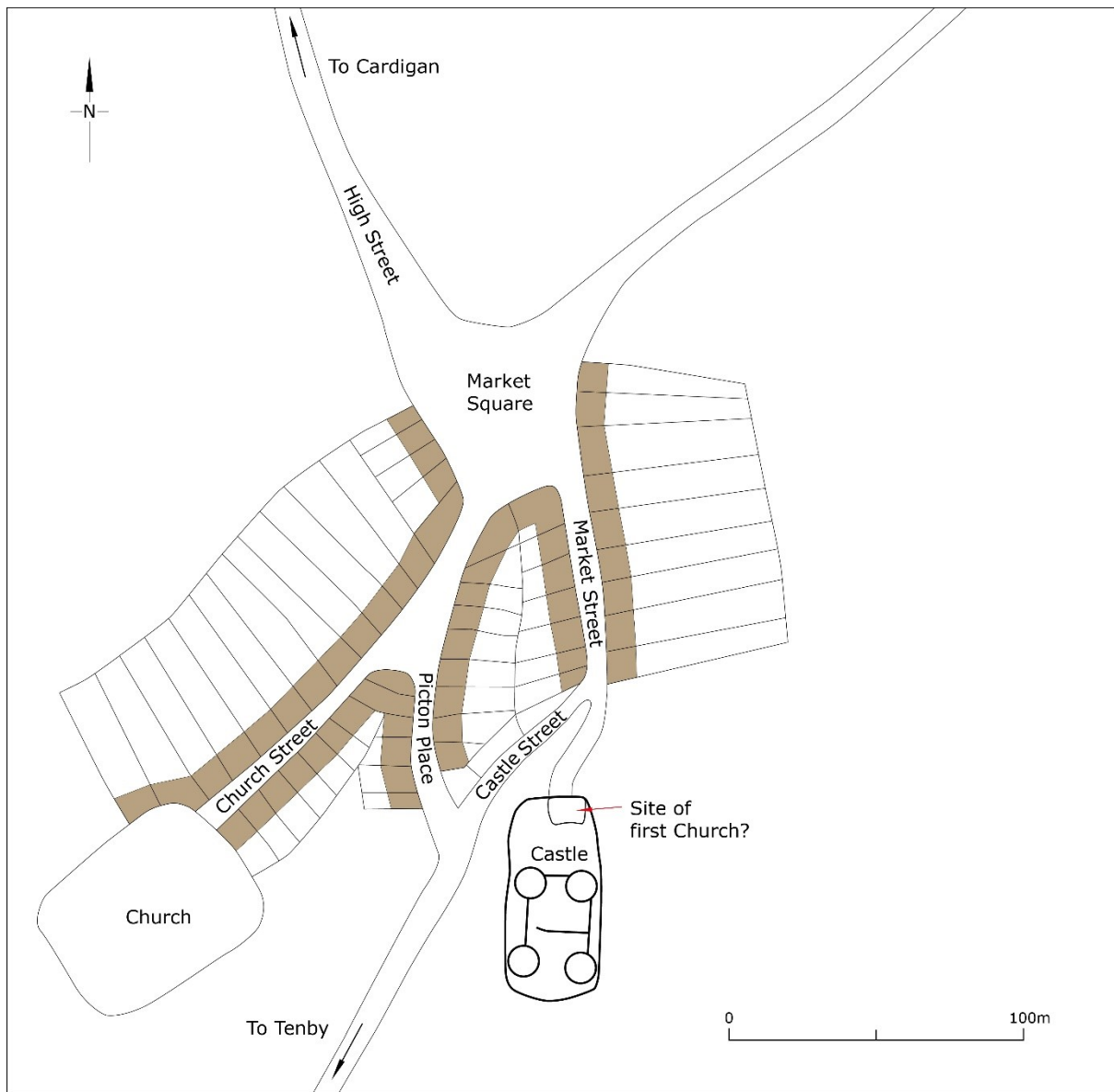


Figure 8. Schematic plan of Narberth as it may have been in the early fourteenth century showing burgage plots and other features. Approximately 55 burgage plots are shown, which is almost double the 30 recorded in the early sixteenth century.