

# THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE MEDIEVAL TOWNS OF SOUTHWEST WALES

## NEWCASTLE EMLYN



*1987 aerial view of Newcastle Emlyn (AP87-140-33)*

Prepared by Dyfed Archaeological Trust  
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By

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# NEWCASTLE EMLYN

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 1240 a new castle was built at Emlyn in a crook of the River Teifi. A settlement developed outside the castle gates which was formalised as a borough in 1303 with a grant of a weekly market and two annual fairs. In 1316 62 burgages were recorded plus 24 other tenants. This seemed to be the high point of the medieval town as by the early fifteenth century just 30 burgesses were present. The medieval town consisted of three main streets, Castle Street, Bridge Street and Sycamore Street, which met at a triangular-shaped market place.

## KEY FACTS

Status: Weekly market and two annual fairs. No town charter.

Size: 1316, 62 burgages plus 24 other tenants.

Archaeology: Burials and other remains revealed in excavations at Holy Trinity Chapel. A medieval pottery kiln investigated to the south of the town.

## LOCATION

Newcastle Emlyn lies on the south bank of the River Teifi (Fig. 1) in Carmarthenshire (SN 310 407) on a narrow peninsular formed by an incised meander of the river. It lies on a bridging point of the Teifi. The medieval town of Adpar lies on the north bank in Ceredigion. The Teifi valley provides a good route-way, to Cardigan and the coast to the west and into the mid-Wales to the east. Roads lead over high ground south to Carmarthen and to the north to Aberystwyth and beyond.

## HISTORY

In 1240 Maredudd ap Rhys built a new castle at Emlyn in Carmarthenshire in a crook of a pronounced meander of the River Teifi, named 'new castle' to distinguish it from the 'old castle' located at Cilgerran, although some authorities locate the 'old castle' at Cenarth. The new castle quickly became the administrative centre for the region. It is assumed that a settlement developed outside the castle gates, but even though the castle was attacked and changed hands three times in 1287 none of the historical sources mentions the existence of settlement. However, Evans, writing in 1922, calls the cluster of houses that developed outside the castle 'Trefcastell'. A bridge over the Teifi was in existence in 1257, linking Newcastle with the castle and settlement of Adpar on the north bank of the river in Ceredigion. In the late twelfth century Adpar was formalised as a town with weekly market and three annual fairs. Ninety-six burgesses were recorded there in 1326.

It was not until 1303 that a town called Newtown or Newtown of Emlyn (hereafter called Newcastle Emlyn) was founded. Twenty-six burgages were recorded in the following year. The new town rapidly expanded; 54 burgages were recorded in 1305, 61 in 1307 and 62 in 1316 plus 24 other tenants. Two annual fairs were established and a weekly market.

The town lay in Cenarth parish and thus did not have a church – the existing parish church of the Holy Trinity was built in 1842. However a chapel of ease dedicated to the Holy Trinity lay outside the castle and is shown on the 1839 tithe map (Fig. 2).

The early fourteenth century was a high point for the town. Like many towns in the region the European-wide population crash had a profound impact on Newcastle Emlyn and competition with Adpar on the opposite bank of the Teifi must have inhibited growth. In the early fifteenth century it is reported that the castle was in ruins and that revenues from the burgesses amounted to just 30s (at 12d per burgage this equates to 30 burgesses).

The later history of Newcastle Emlyn has not been researched, but as Soulsby states the town drifted into obscurity and it's former status almost forgotten.

## **MORPHOLOGY**

The castle occupies a naturally well-defended site within an incised meander of the River Teifi, some 10m above the river. Very little upstanding masonry survives. Earthworks associated with the castle include a ravelin erected during the English Civil War in the seventeenth century. The present castle grounds extent further to the west than the extent of the medieval castle – it is possible that the original settlement developed on what is now open ground immediately west of the upstanding medieval remains.

The approach to the castle is from the west, along Castle Street (Figs. 2-4). The medieval Holy Trinity Chapel lay towards the east end of Castle Street outside the castle gates. At its east end, Castle Street has been widened to form a car park. On the south side of the street land falls steeply away to the river; land on the north side is level – a late twentieth century catholic church is located here. The tithe map shows the east end of Castle Street as open land apart from Holy Trinity Chapel. The west end of Castle Street is narrow and flanked by nineteenth century and later buildings. At its west end the street opens out into a triangular-shaped market place, now occupied by a Victorian market hall, which replaced an earlier building.

A north/south street, the main road through the town, crosses the west side of the market place. To the north of the market place, it runs down to the bridge over the Teifi and hence is called Bridge Street; to the south it is now called Sycamore Street. An almost continuous façade of eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth century buildings line

these two streets. Church Lane runs to the west from the market place giving access to the nineteenth century Holy Trinity Church.

The regular, long narrow house plots on Church Street, Bridge Street and Sycamore Street indicate that they were laid out as burgage plots, probably when the borough was created in 1303.

Thomas Budgen's map of 1811 shows buildings along both sides of Bridge Street, Sycamore Street and the west end of Castle Street, with a secondary centre around a turnpike road (now the A484) to the south. There had been little change by 1839 when the Cenarth parish tithe map was surveyed (Fig. 2). New housing and other development did not occur on any great scale until the second half of the twentieth century (Fig. 3).

There is no evidence that the medieval town was defended, but as Delaney and Soulsby point out it would have been a simple matter to have created a bank and ditch across the neck of the meander to protect the settlement around the castle.

## **BUILDINGS AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES AND MONUMENTS**

### **Scheduled Monuments**

There are two scheduled monuments in Newcastle Emlyn: the medieval castle –CM085 – and the post-medieval bridge over the River Teifi – CM087 –(Fig. 4). The castle and the bridge are also listed buildings.

### **Listed Buildings**

There are approximately 27 listed buildings in the historic core of Newcastle Emlyn. Apart from the castle and the bridge all are eighteenth/nineteenth century domestic buildings, commercial premises, chapels/churches and street furniture. Three are listed grade II\*; the remainder are grade II (Fig. 4).

### **Conservation Area**

The whole of the historic core of Newcastle Emlyn lies in the Newcastle Emlyn Conservation Area (Fig. 4).

### **Registered Parks and Gardens**

There are no registered parks and gardens in Newcastle Emlyn.

### **Registered Historic Landscape**

Newcastle Emlyn is not in a registered historic landscape.

### **Undesignated Historic Environment Assets**

There are approximately 35 site and monuments recorded on the regional Historic Environment Record. However, 27 of these are duplicates of the listed buildings and

most of the others are of unlisted nineteenth century and more recent buildings and structures. Of the remainder, of note is the site of medieval/post-medieval Holy Trinity Chapel immediately outside the castle and a medieval pottery kiln lying in what would have been open ground in the medieval period some distance from the town's historic core (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 (Fig. 6).

1. A small-scale evaluation excavation in 1993 close to where a skeleton was found in 1982 revealed part of the foundations of the medieval/post-medieval Holy Trinity Chapel and four burials within the chapel in advance of car park extension. The burials and foundations were left *in situ*. Reference: Crane 1993 (32486).
2. Rubble clearance took place inside the castle in the 1980s during a programme of restoration. Reference: Parry 1987.
3. Nothing of archaeological interest was noted in 2018 during the installation of lighting and CCTW. Reference: Enright 2018 (112708).
4. A cobbled pavement and related features of nineteenth century date were recorded during a watching brief to the rear of the Victorian market hall in 2014. Reference: Hall and Sambrook 2014 (111420).



*The cobble surface revealed to the rear of the market hall.*

5. A medieval pottery kiln was discovered during the construction of a patio wall in 1993. An excavation in 2004 confirmed the nature of the site and that a range of products had been manufactured at the kiln site, including jugs and cooking pots. The 2004 excavations stopped at the top of the *in situ* remains and the site was backfilled, preserving the kiln. This and one from Newport, Pembrokeshire are the only known medieval pottery kilns in west Wales. Reference: Early and Morgan 2004 (63004).

### **ARCHAEOLOGICAL POTENTIAL**

Newcastle Emlyn 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 the post-medieval research theme on settlements (towns).

Street frontages in the medieval core of the town present an almost unbroken façade of eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth century buildings, many of them listed and all within the conservation area, and thus opportunities for archaeological investigation are limited. However, there is open land towards the east end of Castle Street where the earliest elements of the town are most likely to be located. Here, small-scale excavations on the site of Holy Trinity Chapel demonstrated that medieval deposits survive, and so

this general area must be considered of high archaeological potential. Figure 7 shows the layout of the town as it may have been in the early fourteenth century.

The discovery of a medieval pottery kiln some distance from the core of the medieval town demonstrates that important archaeology can be found almost anywhere.

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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>

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/002OSD000000021U0014400>





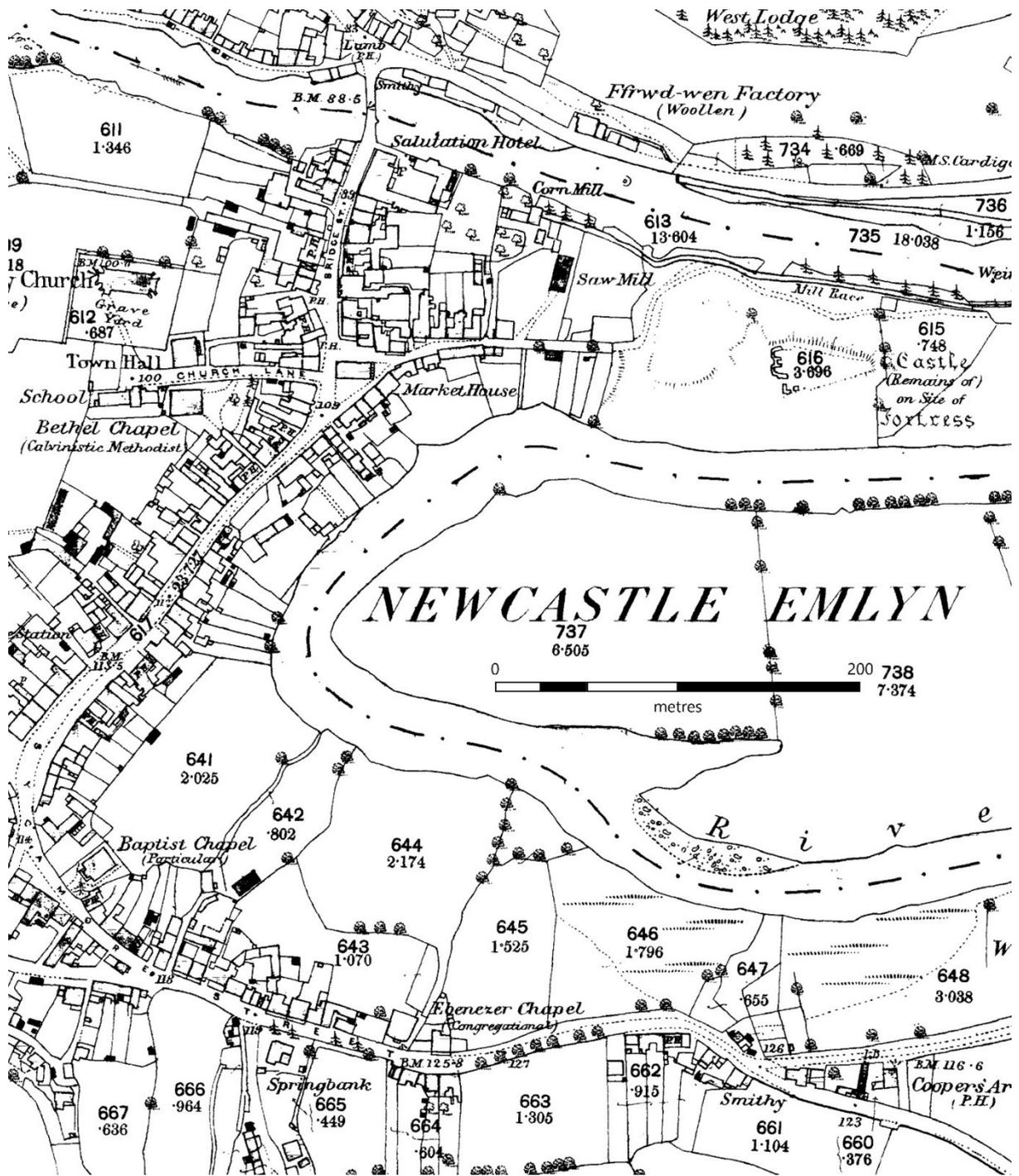


Figure 3. Extract from the 1889 Ordnance Survey 1:2500 1<sup>st</sup> Edition map (Cardiganshire 45.02).

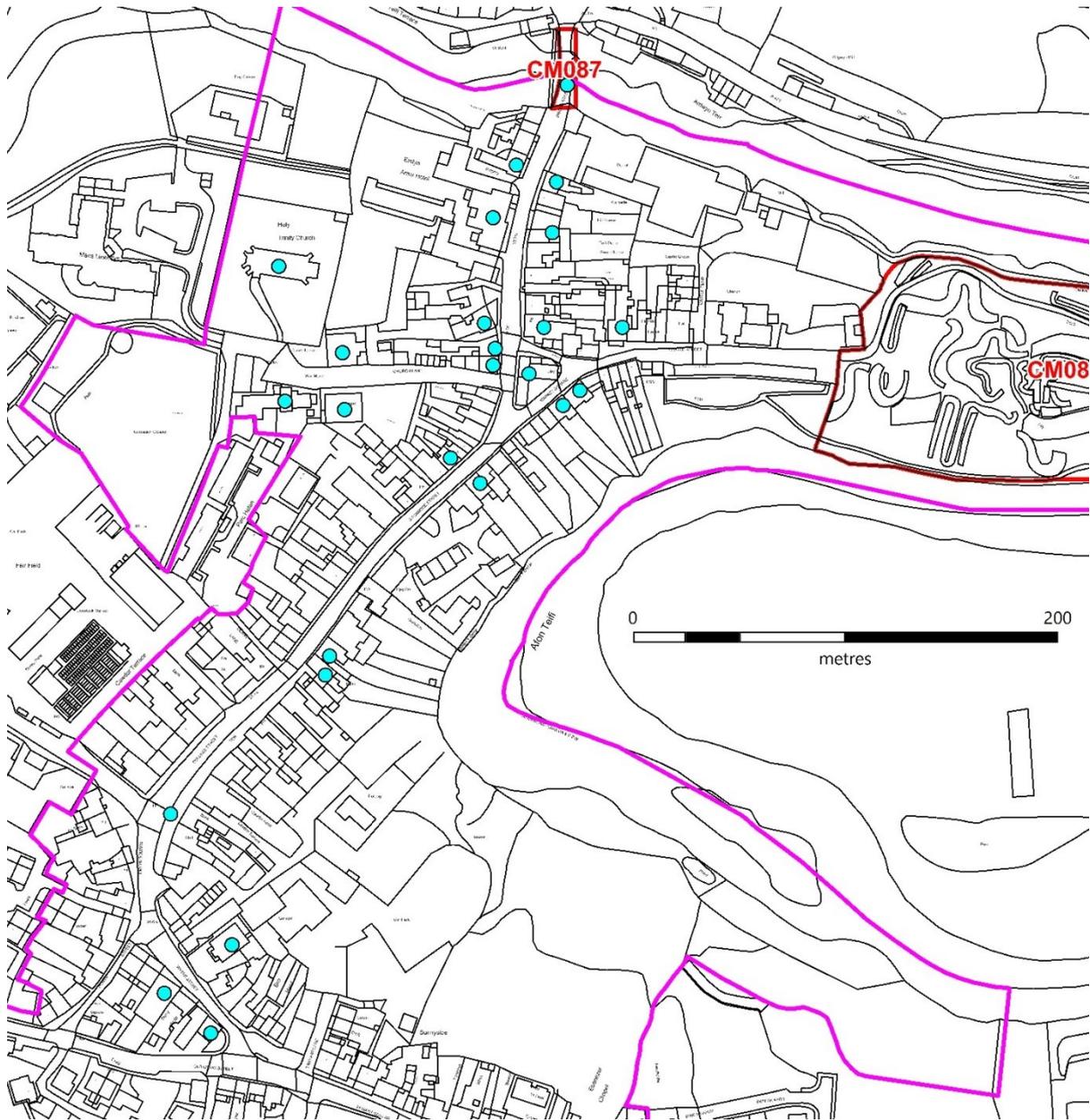


Figure 4. Listed buildings (blue circles), scheduled monument (red numbering) and the conservation area (purple outline).

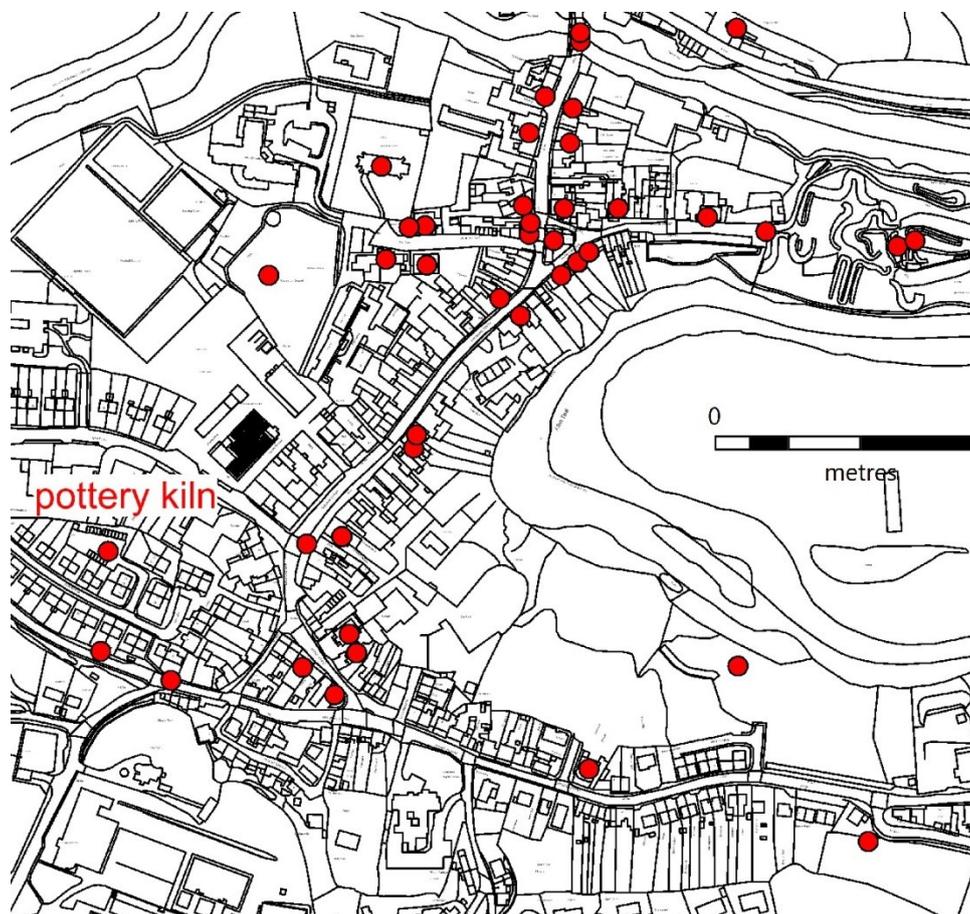


Figure 5. HER sites.

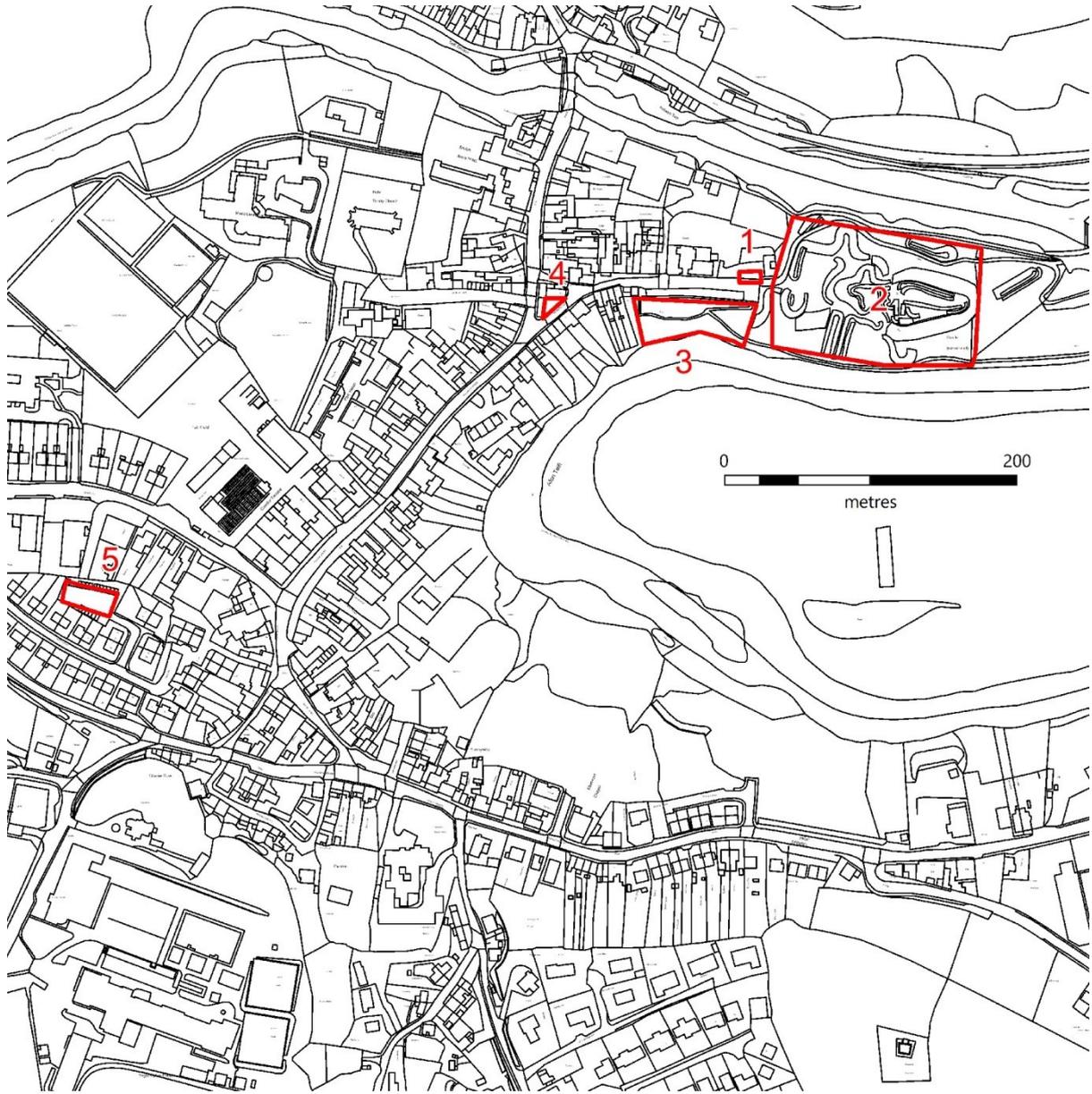
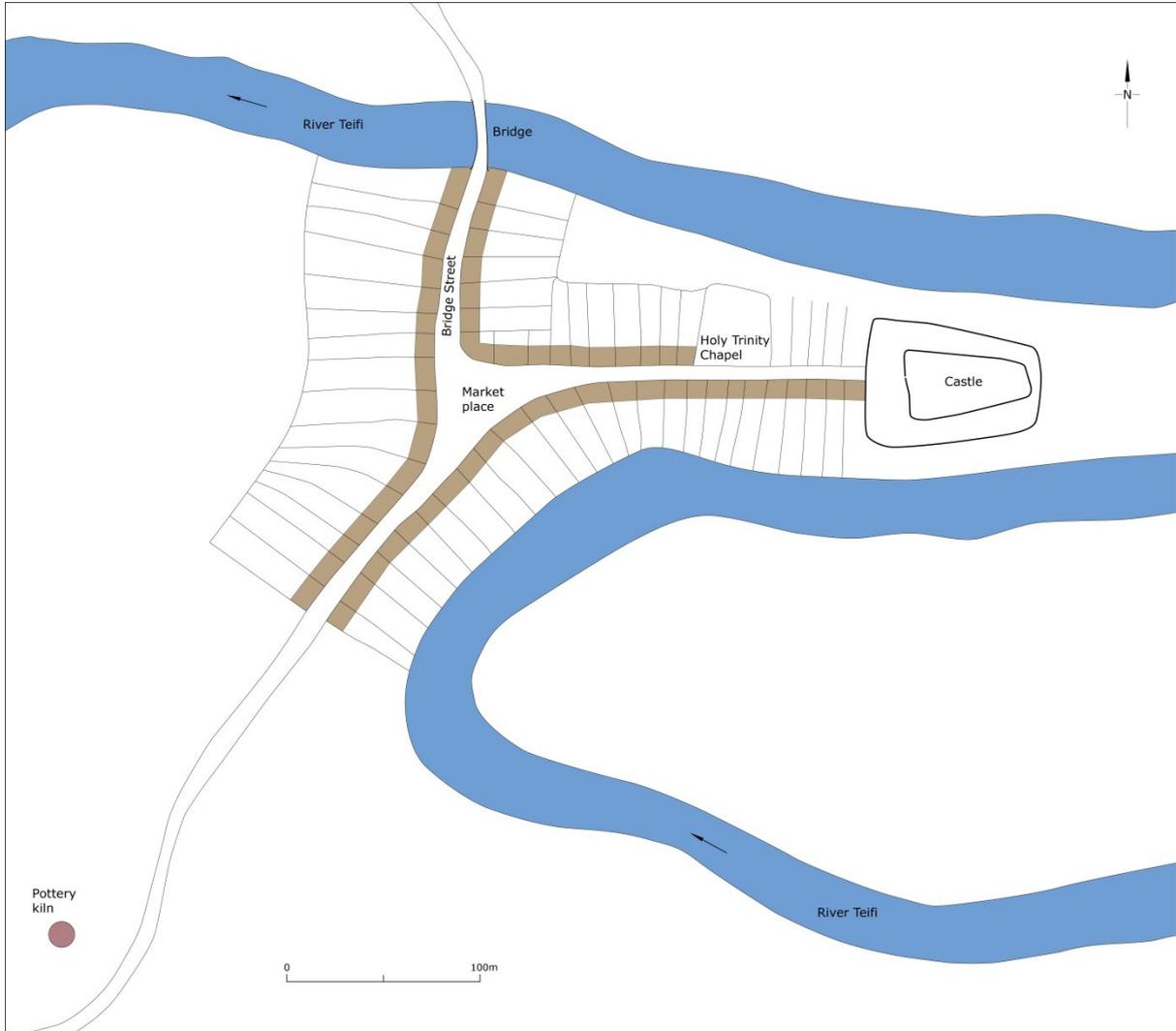


Figure 6. Archaeological interventions



*Figure 7. Schematic plan of Newcastle Emlyn as it may have been at its maximum extent in the medieval period, c.1320.*