

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE MEDIEVAL TOWNS OF SOUTHWEST WALES

NEWPORT



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By

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NEWPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

William Fitzmartin founded Newport in the late twelfth century, laying out a grid pattern of streets; a pattern that is still evident. During the thirteenth century the focus of the town moved from the northern end to the southern end close to the church and castle, resulting in the desertion of that part of the town close to the estuary. Archaeological excavation in the deserted northern part of the town revealed a pattern of burgages and dwellings associated with the town's foundation. Overall the town seems to have undergone depopulation from the thirteenth century; evaluation excavation on undeveloped land in the southern part of the town identified and to some extent characterised this depopulation. Well-preserved late medieval pottery kilns discovered in 1921 demonstrate that important archaeological remains may be found in just about any location in the town.

KEY FACTS

Status: 1241 town charter.

Size: 1434, 233 burgages in the hands of 76 burgesses.

Archaeology: Excavations have demonstrated that deposits dating to the medieval period survive in the town.

LOCATION

Newport (Trefdraeth) lies on a gentle north-facing coastal plain on the south side of the Nevern estuary in north Pembrokeshire (SN 058 393), 1.2 km from the sea. To the south of the town the land rises steeply to the rocky summit of Carningli at 346m. The A487 coastal trunk road runs east-west through the town (Fig. 1).

HISTORY

William Fitzmartin founded Newport c.1197. The Fitzmartins had taken control of north Pembrokeshire in the early twelfth century, establishing a castle at Nevern, a few kilometres upstream of Newport. Nevern Castle changed hands several times during the twelfth century, with the Welsh under Rhys ap Gruffudd in the ascendancy for much of the latter part of the century. When the Fitzmartin's regained control towards the end of the century, they abandoned Nevern in favour of establishing a new town and castle at Newport. The privileges granted by William Fitzmartin to the town in 1197 were confirmed in a charter by his son, Nicholas, in c.1241. The thirteenth was as tempestuous as the previous century; in 1215 Llywelyn ap Iorwerth destroyed Newport Castle and in 1257 it was again razed to the ground, this time by Llywelyn ap Gruffudd.

William Fitzmartin's original castle was probably the ringwork, now known as Old Castle, on the shore of the estuary. Two long streets, Long Street and St Mary's Street, were laid out running south from this castle. It is likely that the castle was relocated to its present commanding position at the south end of the town following the attack of 1215 or that of 1257. The focus of the town moved from the estuary and Old Castle to the south, close to the new castle with a grid pattern of streets being laid out. All the appurtenances of a medieval borough – the church, market cross and shire hall – were situated in the southern part of the town.

A survey of 1434 records 233 burgage plots in the hands of 76 burgesses. The location of these plots is shown on Figure 2. The survey records that by 1434 the town had expanded with plots having been laid out along West Street, East Street and Bridge Street. However, with just 76 burgess recorded it is likely that some of the burgages had fallen vacant. Certainly, an archaeological excavation on Long Street in 1991 confirmed that plots in the northern part of the town had been abandoned early in the thirteenth century and never reoccupied (see below).

A rental of 1594 records depopulation, with just 44 of 211 burgage plots occupied, all clustered in the southern part of the town. Consolidation of plots into small fields had taken place in the northern part of the town close to Old Castle. Clearly the town was in an advanced state of decay and did not start to recover until the late eighteenth century when Richard Fenton noted: 'the chasms in its depopulated streets are filling up fast with buildings'.

The Parrog to the west of the town, close to the mouth of the estuary, is a small quay and had been since at least the eighteenth century; its earlier status is uncertain. It is likely that the original 'port' of Newport was by Old Castle, but as the estuary silted it shifted to the Parrog; this could have occurred in the medieval period.

MORPHOLOGY

Newport has the classic traits of a planted, planned medieval borough, much of which is readable on modern maps (Figs 2 and 3) and in the town's morphology. Long Street and St Mary's Street run parallel from the estuary to the south for 550m, bounded on the west by the stream Afon Felin and to the east by Afon Ysgolheigion. The streets and the streams package what is probably the first phase of the town into a neat rectangle. Long narrow burgages lie on both sides of these streets: at the southern end late eighteenth/nineteenth century stone-built houses and commercial premises occupy the plots, with a few later buildings; at the northern end the plots are vacant or have been amalgamated into small fields. A late twentieth century primary school occupies several plots towards the northern end of Long Street.

A second phase of the town is represented by the grid pattern of streets at the southern end of the town. West Street, East Street, Goat Street and Bridge Street are probably the result of further phases of expansion. Results of an archaeological evaluation in 2011 indicate that burgages on Goat Street were laid out in the late fourteenth/early fifteenth century (see below). Most of the burgages in the southern portion of the town are occupied by eighteenth/nineteenth century stone-built houses with some later buildings. There are few vacant plots.

There is no evidence in the morphology that the town was provided with defences. However, the excavator of a 2011 evaluation suggests that a double ditch pre-dating burgages on Goat Street could have functioned as a defensive feature associated with an early phase of the town.

Newport Castle, a substantial earthwork with masonry dating mainly to the fourteenth century, stands on a high point at the south end of the town. A mid-nineteenth century house, still occupied, was built into the gatehouse.

St Mary's Church is assumed to have been founded at the same time as the town. The present building is largely medieval; it was restored several times during the nineteenth century. It stands in a churchyard in the south part of town below the castle.

There are some modern houses on single plots in the core of the town, but recent housing is largely confined to the fringes of the town outside the medieval core recorded in the 1434 survey.

Former sub-division of fields on the west side of Long Street, northern end, is visible on LiDAR imagery. These are former burgages recorded in 1434. No such sub-divisions are visible on the east side of Long Street or the east side of St Mary's Street, northern ends. A sports field occupies the east side of Long Street – it is likely that landscaping of this has taken place. Agriculture over several centuries has probably erased the superficial evidence for burgages on the east side of St Mary's street.

Figures 6 and 7 show Newport as it may have been in c.1220 and c.1320.

BUILDINGS AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES AND MONUMENTS

Scheduled Monuments (Fig. 3)

There are six scheduled monuments in Newport:

Newport Castle (PE087). The medieval castle is also a listed building grade I.

Old Castle (PE404) - the earthwork ringwork close to the estuary.

Medieval pottery kilns (PE437) beneath the memorial hall.

Medieval cross in the churchyard (PE304).

Medieval cross to the southeast of the churchyard (PE305).

Carreg Coetan prehistoric burial chamber (PE056) on the east side of the town.

Listed Buildings

There are 48 listed buildings in Newport, including those at the Parrog. Most are domestic structures listed grade II, but also included are limekilns at the Parrog, St Mary's Church and Ebenezer Chapel (both grade II*) and Newport Castle (grade I).

Conservation Area

The core of Newport, The Parrog and houses on the coast edge to the west of The Parrog are in a conservation area.

Registered Parks and Gardens

There are no registered parks and gardens in Newport.

Registered Historic Landscape

Newport lies in the Newport and Carnigli Registered Historic Landscape. It has been characterised in the Newport character area.

Undesignated Historic Environment Assets (Fig. 4)

There are approximately 90 sites and monuments on the Regional Historic Environment Record. However, many of these are duplicate records of listed buildings or scheduled monuments.

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. The excavation of Carreg Coitan burial chamber is not included.

Numbers in parentheses below refer to records in the Dyfed Historic Environment Record (Fig. 5).

1. Geophysical survey followed by evaluation and then open area excavation was undertaken on a green-field site on Long Street in advance of construction of a new primary school in 1991. The excavation coupled with documentary research demonstrated that three burgage plots had occupied the site. These had been laid out during the foundation of the town in the late twelfth century. Well preserved stratified deposits from the early years of the town survived. Houses, probably earth-built (known locally as clom), had been built on the plots alongside the street frontage, but these were short-lived and following their abandonment, perhaps as a result of the attack on Newport in 1215 or in 1257, the plots were

left vacant. However, it was clear that the burgage plots continued to be demarcated and managed separately for several hundred years until eventually they were consolidated into a single field. An assemblage of over 7000 sherds of medieval pottery was found during the excavation, dominated by locally produced Dyfed Gravel Tempered Ware. A large assemblage of Mesolithic flints was found in the earliest archaeological deposits. It is worth noting that the archaeological remains were ephemeral and that even with the knowledge gained from the open area excavation it was not possible to identify anything of interest during a watching brief on unexcavated areas during construction of the school. Reference: Murphy 1994 (32130).



The 1991 open area excavation at Long Street with ditches and gullies associated with the medieval houses along the street frontage (left). Note the criss-cross pattern of soil marks resulting from gardening/agriculture to the rear of the burgage plots.



Long Street excavation. The figures are standing at the corners of the drainage ditch surrounding one of the clom houses.

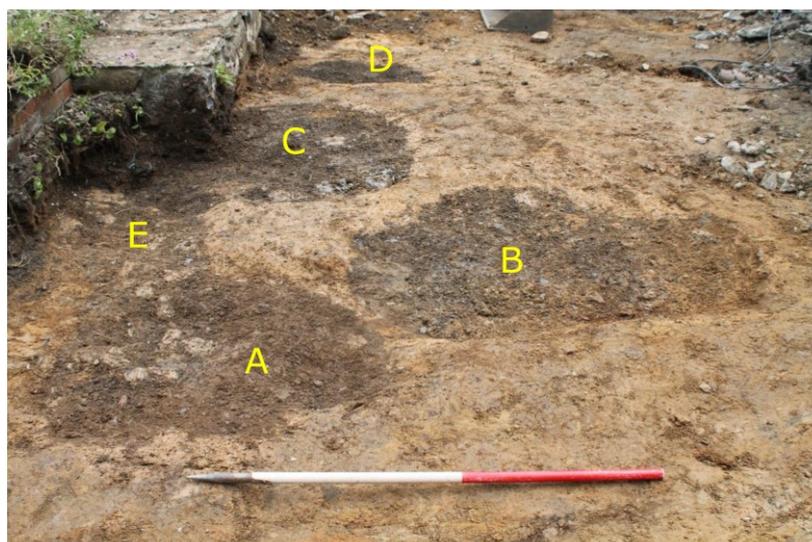
2. An archaeological evaluation was carried out on a proposed housing development to the east of St Mary's Church at the south end of the town in 2011. Fourteen trenches were excavated totalling 650m in length in four of the five fields of the proposed development. On the northern edge of the site, fronting Goat Street, ephemeral remains of four structures were recorded, together with burgage plot boundary ditches and a rubbish pit. The excavator considered the plots were laid out in the late fourteenth or early fifteenth centuries and were short-lived. There was no evidence for burgage plots having been laid out on Feidr Bentick on the east side of the site or on Feidr Eglwys on the south side. A double ditch on the east side of the site pre-dating the burgage plot boundaries may have functioned as a defensive feature associated with an early phase of the town. At the southern edge of the site there was evidence for post-medieval occupation and agricultural activity. An assemblage of medieval pottery was found, mostly comprising Dyfed Gravel Tempered Ware. Tentative evidence for prehistoric use of the site was also recorded. Reference: Pannett 2011 (102743).
3. Medieval pottery kilns. In 1921 two pottery kilns were discovered during construction of Newport Memorial Hall. The kilns were preserved beneath the stage of the hall. In 2016-17 during hall renovation further investigation revealed there had been three kilns, with one considered to be the best preserved late medieval kiln in Britain. Pottery being manufactured was in the Dyfed Gravel

Tempered Ware tradition – coarse earthenware – dating to the late fifteenth/early sixteenth centuries. The kilns are now on display. Reference: RCAHMW 1925, 277; Dawson and Kent 2020 (21320)

4. A watching brief was undertaken during the renovation and construction of a rear extension to a house (Gwaunfa) on West Street. The house occupied a burgage plot. To the rear of the house a group of pits and other features were recorded, but not excavated and were preserved beneath the development levels. The pits probably dated to the late medieval period, on the basis of locally produced pottery within them. Other features were probably late medieval/early modern. Murphy 2015 (107364).



The start of the watching brief at Gwaunfa.



The tops of pits revealed during the watching brief at Gwaunfa.

5. A watching brief was maintained during construction of a house on a vacant plot on Parrog Road in 2014. Topsoil lay directly on clay subsoil. No features or finds of archaeological significance were recorded. A few sherds of post-medieval pottery were found in the topsoil. Reference: Davies 2014 (107506).



Topsoil removal on the vacant plot on Parrog Road.

6. A watching brief during construction of a small extension to Green Cottage, Long Street demonstrated that previous building work had removed all evidence of medieval and later deposits, assuming that they had been present. Reference: Manley Jones 2007 (62591).



Photograph of the foundation trenches at Green Cottage.

7. A watching brief was maintained during the construction of a culvert and two car-parking spaces at Felindre to the rear of Long Street. Nothing of archaeological interest was noted. Reference: Manley Jones 2010 (97159).
8. A watching brief was maintained during the construction of a small extension at The Globe, Upper St Mary Street. The ground through which foundation trenches were excavated had been heavily disturbed by twentieth century building work and debris. Nothing of archaeological interest was noted. Reference: Manley Jones 2006 (57026).



Foundation trenches at The Globe.

9. A watching brief was maintained during the construction of a small extension at Awel Deg, Goat Street. Nothing of archaeological interest was recorded in the foundation trenches. Reference: Manley Jones 2013 (111135)
10. A watching brief was maintained during the construction of a small extension and a garage at Glanhelyg, Long Street. Glanhelyg is a bungalow constructed in the 1960s, set back from the street frontage. No structural remains were recorded in the foundation trenches although a discoloured layer above clay geology

contained a considerable amount of medieval pottery. This layer was similar in character to that which contained the medieval remains recorded in the 1991 excavation on the opposite side of Long Street. It is possible that more intensive investigation, rather than just a watching brief, at Glanhelyg would have revealed more complex archaeological remains. Reference: Manley Jones 2011 (100605).



Glynhelyg foundation trenches.

11. An archaeological watching brief was undertaken during demolition of an old school canteen and during the excavation of foundation trenches for a new house. A considerable amount of disturbance had occurred during construction of the canteen; nothing of archaeological interest survived. Reference: Ramsey 1996 (33381).

12. An archaeological watching brief was undertaken during construction of a small extension to rugby club changing rooms in 2012. Despite the small-scale of the development and previous modern ground disturbance archaeological deposits and features survived. A silted ditch was similar in character to those recorded in the 1991 open-area excavation to the south and is likely to have been a burgage plot boundary. Reference: Wilson 2012 (102583).



The area of the changing room extension.



Medieval ditch exposed in the foundation trench of the changing room extension.

13. A watching brief was maintained during topsoil stripping and foundations digging for the construction of a house (Kisongo) in a plot set back from the street frontage of Long Street, within a former burgage plot. Nothing of archaeological interest was noted; topsoil lay directly over clay geology. Reference: Manley Jones 2005 (56976).



Topsoil stripped from Kisongo building plot.



Kisongo building plot showing topsoil directly over clay geology.

- 14 A watching brief was maintained during topsoil stripping and foundations digging for the construction of a house (Hinemoa) in a plot set back from the street frontage of Long Street, within a former burgage plot. The results were similar to that of Kisongo (above) - nothing of archaeological interest was noted; topsoil lay directly over clay geology. Reference: Manley Jones 2002 (43189)

- 15 An evaluation consisting of two 20m long trenches positioned over the footprint of a proposed dwelling at Tyddyn Dolwerdd on a green-field site was undertaken in 2010. Linear features, probably land drains and a modern pit were recorded, but nothing else of archaeological interest was noted. Reference: Ramsey 2010 (99814).



Location of the Tyddyn Dolwerdd evaluation.



One of the Tyddyn Dolwerdd evaluation trenches.

16 A three-day watching brief was maintained during groundworks on an undeveloped plot at 42 Parrog Road in advance of the construction of three dwellings. The plot measured 37m by 17m. Topsoil was stripped using a toothless grading bucket. Nothing of archaeological interest was noted. Reference: Jenkins 2019 (119222).



Topsoil stripping in progress at 42 Parrog Road.

- 17 A watching brief was undertaken on works in advance of a new land stage at The Parrog. Nothing of archaeological interest was noted. Reference: Jones 2013 (111136).
- 18 A visit was made during construction of Ystrad Fflur on Long Street at the invitation of the site's owners in the early 1980s. A small assemblage of medieval pottery (mostly Dyfed Gravel Tempered Ware) had been found during construction and two stone walls at right angle had been uncovered. Further investigation revealed another wall. Ystrad Fflur occupies the front of a burgage plot. It was not possible to determine if the walls and pottery were associated, or whether the walls were part of a building. Reference: Stenger 1985 (11321).

ARCHAEOLOGICAL POTENTIAL

Newport has high potential to address some key agenda items for research for the medieval period, including: Norman expansion into southwest Wales (town plantation, castle building and church building) and Welsh resistance and adaptation. It also has the potential to address post-medieval research theme on settlements (towns).

Excavation and watching briefs have demonstrated that undisturbed archaeological deposits dating to the late twelfth/early thirteenth century – the earliest years of the town - survive in good condition on undeveloped areas at the northern end of the town on Long Street and St Mary's Street. Although not unique in Wales, deposits of this nature are rare and have the potential to enhance our understanding of a critical period in the history of Wales.

Evaluation on undeveloped land in the northern end of the town highlighted the archaeological potential of this area. Here well preserved medieval deposits have been

shown to survive. Unlike undeveloped areas at the northern end of the town here occupation continued into the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries before abandonment.

The discovery of the medieval pottery kilns at the Memorial Hall means that it must be assumed that there is the potential for important discoveries to be made virtually anywhere in the town, whether on undeveloped land or during small-scale building work and renovations to existing buildings. A watching brief during construction of a small extension at Gwanfa has demonstrated this potential for discoveries to be made even during modest building works.

Extant domestic and commercial buildings date mainly from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but they could incorporate earlier elements and thus their potential should not be overlooked.

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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>

Research framework for the Archaeology of Wales

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



Figure 1. Location map.

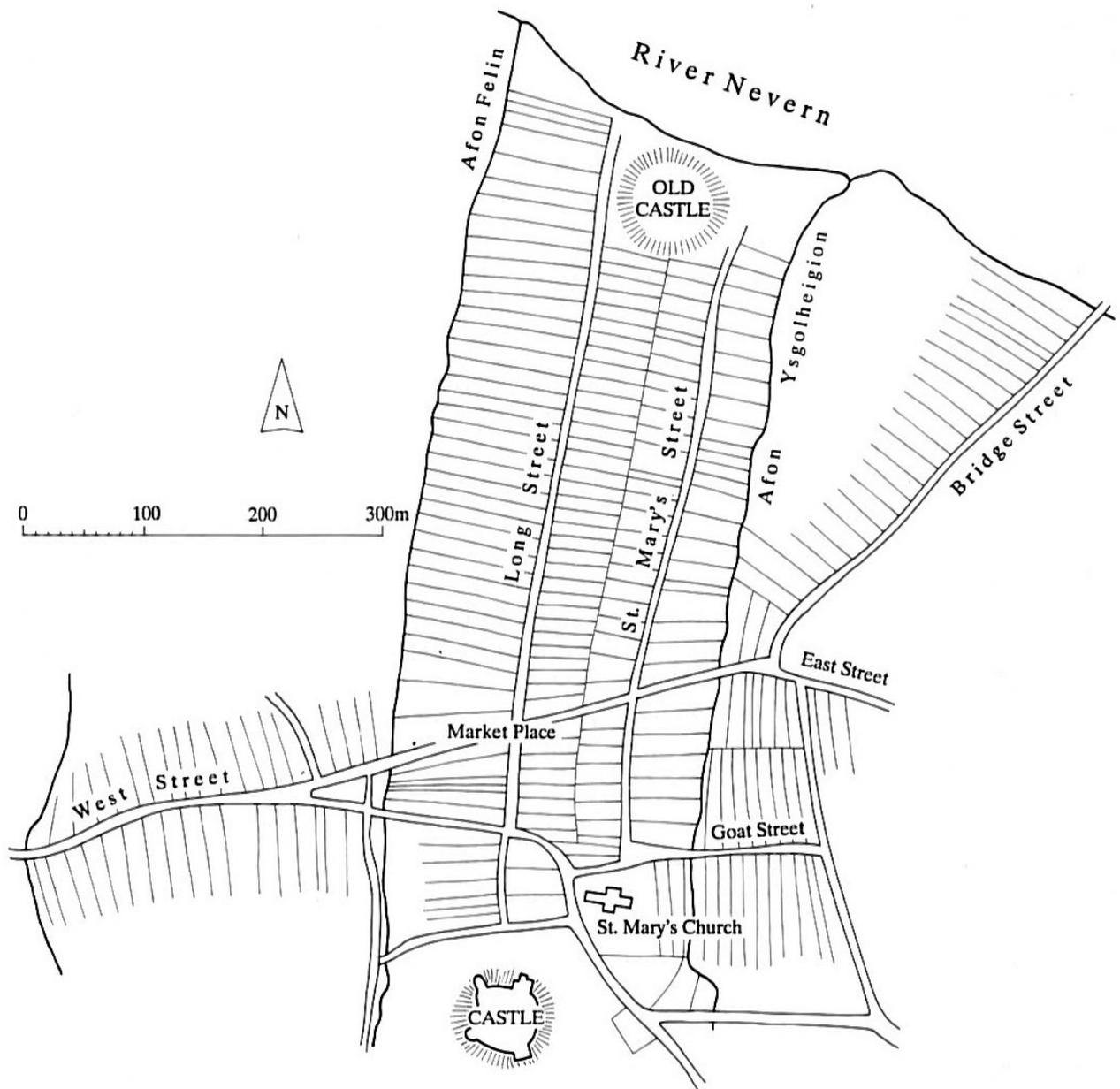


Figure 2. Semi-schematic plan of Newport based on a rental of 1434 (after Murphy 1994).

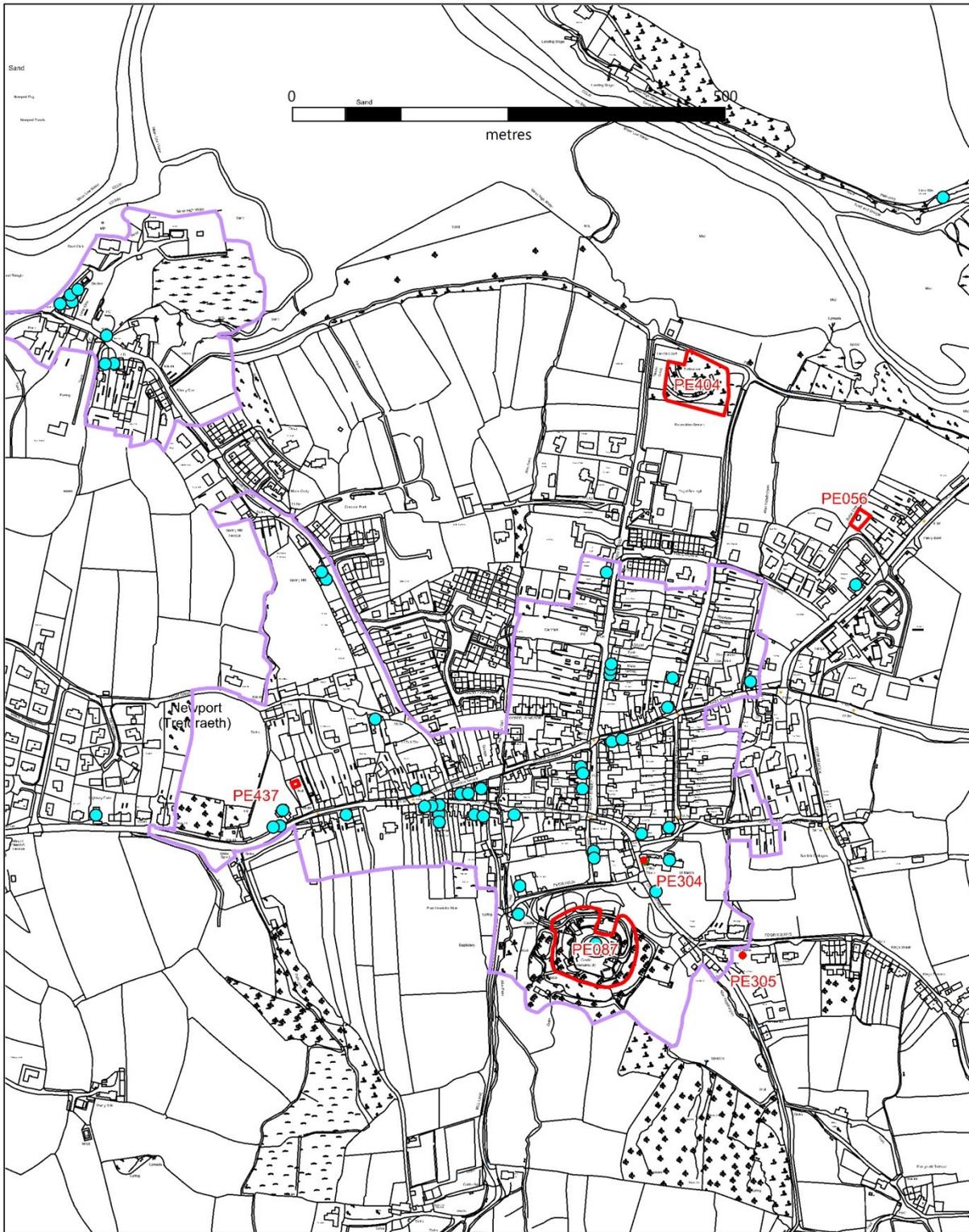


Figure 3. Listed buildings (blue circles), scheduled monuments (outlined in red) and the conservation area (outlined in purple).



Figure 4. Sites recorded on the Dyfed Historic Environment Record (red stars).

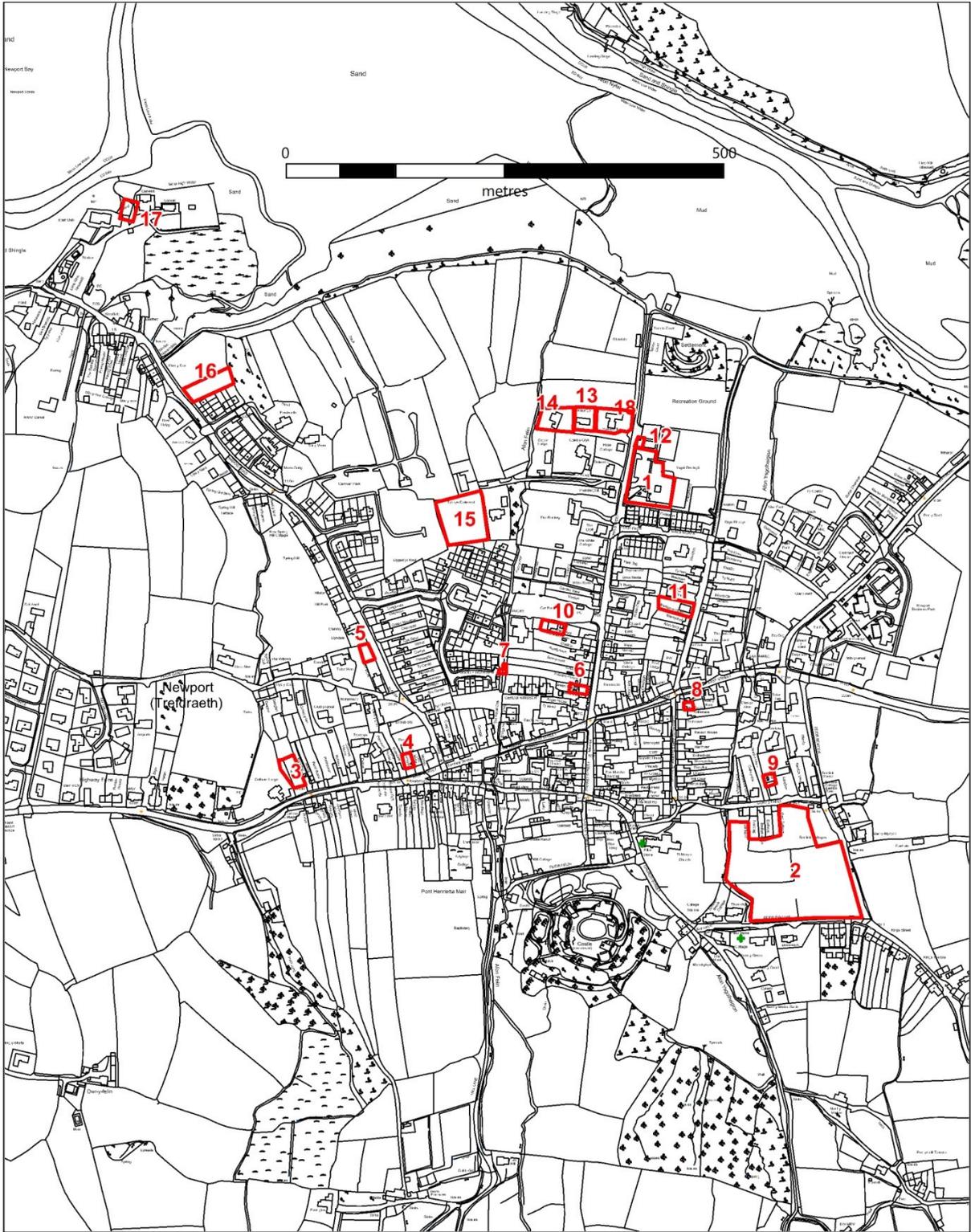


Figure 5. Location of archaeological interventions.



Figure 6. Newport as it may have been c.1220.



Figure 7. Newport as it may have been c.1320.