

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE MEDIEVAL TOWNS OF SOUTHWEST WALES

ST CLEARS



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By

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ST CLEARS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Anglo-Normans founded a castle at St Clears in the early twelfth century during their conquest of southwest Wales. A small settlement, protected by earth and timber defences, developed outside the castle gates. The settlement spread either side of the road running north towards the priory, which was also the parish church. A town charter was granted in 1393. The town remained small and from the mid-eighteenth century its focus shifted 1 km north from its medieval core. Small-scale investigations have demonstrated that medieval and later deposits survive in the core of the historic town.

KEY FACTS

Status: 1393 town charter.

Size: Unknown, but small.

Archaeology: An excavation and several smaller pieces of work have demonstrated the presence of medieval archaeological deposits.

LOCATION

St Clears lies in south Carmarthenshire (SN 281152) at the confluence of the Tâf and Cynin rivers at their lowest bridging point (Figs. 1-3). The rivers are tidal up to St Clears, although navigable only for small boats. The small town of Laugharne lies on the Tâf 6 km downstream. The Tâf, Towy and Gwendraeth rivers converge south of Laugharne forming a wide estuary. Carmarthen town lies on the Towy and Kidwelly on the Gwendraeth.

HISTORY

The town and castle of St Clears is poorly documented. In common with other locations in the region it is probable that a castle at St Clears was established during the Anglo-Norman conquest of southwest Wales in the early twelfth century. The first documentary reference to it is in 1153 when the Brut y Tywysogyon records 'Rhys ap Gruffudd, and a large host with him, ravaged the castle of Ystrad Cyngen.' Control of the castle then alternated between Welsh and English rulers until 1230 when it was granted to William Marshall the younger. The Marshalls were great castle builders and so it is probable that Marshall the younger converted the earth and timber castle to stone. It would seem that the castle fell into decay from the mid-to-late thirteenth century.

A Cluniac priory dedicated to St Clarus and Mary Magdalene was founded at St Clears between 1147 and 1184. The church functioned as both a priory and parish church. The priory was dissolved in about 1414. The extant church is mainly medieval with some

nineteenth century restoration. It has been suggested that the dedication to St Clarus indicates an early medieval foundation.

The first mention of a town is in 1248, but it is likely that a settlement developed outside the gates of the castle soon after its foundation. A town charter was granted in 1393. The medieval and early modern history of St Clears has not been thoroughly researched, but it is known that it continued to function as a small port with ships docking at the quay close to the bridge well into the twentieth century. Shipping is one of the better documented aspects of medieval St Clears and records suggests a thriving port ; in 1297 all St Clears ships of 40 ton and upwards were commanded to report to the king at Plymouth, and in 1326 ships of 50 ton and upward were commanded to report at Portsmouth to prepare for an attack on the French.

In 1763 the establishment of a turnpike trust to upgrade the road from Carmarthen to St Clears and on to Tavernspite shifted the focus of the town from its medieval core around the castle and church to a location c.1 km to the north. The opening of the railway between Carmarthen and Haverfordwest in 1854 pushed the town's focus even further north away from its historic core.

MORPHOLOGY

Medieval St Clears lies in the crook of the confluence of the Tâf and Cynin, with only the north and northwest sides of the town not bounded by water. Thus, although it is low-lying, it is a naturally well-defended location.

The castle consists of a substantial motte with a bailey to its south. The bailey experienced clearance and levelling in the second half of the twentieth century; despite this a geophysical survey detected buried stone foundations. Stonework has also been noted on the motte.

This initial core of the town was very small, and although there is no documentary evidence for it having been defended morphology and topography indicates that it was; this has been proven by excavation (see below). The line of the defences is shown on Figure 3. The line of the defences is well established on the west side of the town but less so on the north where there must have been a gate where the main road enters the town. The defensive line to the east and south is open to speculation- it may be here that the rivers formed the main defensive element. The morphology of the town suggests that the defended area of the town was extended at least once and possibly twice. Historic map evidence shows burgages on either side of the main north/south road through the town (Bridge Street and High Street). It is uncertain whether medieval development extended as far north as St Mary's Church and beyond.

It is assumed that a bridge stood at its present location from the earliest years of the town as it is on the main route west from Carmarthen to Laugharne, Tenby and Pembroke.

St Mary's Church (and medieval priory) lay to the north of the core of the medieval town, perhaps originally separated from it by undeveloped land. The claustral buildings lay to the south of the church.

As noted above the focus of the town moved to the north from at least the mid-eighteenth century. There is no evidence for medieval occupation in these northern areas.

BUILDINGS AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES AND MONUMENTS

Scheduled Monuments

There are two scheduled monuments in St Clears (Fig. 4):

St Clears Castle (CM095). The scheduled area includes the motte and the bailey.

St Clears Priory claustral buildings (CM290). The site of the claustral and buildings on the south side of St Mary Magdalene's Church.

Listed Buildings

There are 17 listed buildings in the historic core of St Clears. St Mary Magdalene's Church is grade II* (Fig. 4). The rest are grade II, post-medieval or modern in date and include St Clears bridge, the town hall, a water pump, telephone box and domestic buildings.

Conservation Area

Most of the historic core of St Clears and surrounding land is in a conservation area. However, some part of the medieval defended town are excluded (Fig. 4).

Registered Parks and Gardens

There are no Registered Parks and Gardens.

Registered Historic Landscape

St Clears does not lie in a Registered Historic Landscape.

Undesignated Historic Environment Assets

There are approximately 40 sites and monuments on the Regional Historic Environment Record. However, many of these are duplicate records of listed buildings or scheduled monuments (Fig. 5). Those that are not duplicates include undesignated buildings and industrial sites including brickworks and lime kilns.

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.

Numbers in parentheses below refer to records in the Dyfed Historic Environment Record (Fig. 6).

1. A magnetometry survey and a resistivity survey were undertaken in 2003 in the bailey of St Clears Castle. Very little of note was recorded in the magnetic data apart from a possible hearth or furnace. A series of buried masonry walls were recorded in the resistivity survey; these were assumed to be of medieval date. Reference: Deakin and Evans 2003 (97158).
2. A small-scale evaluation in 1993 at a property known as Parc-y-Drain immediately to the north of the defences of the medieval town revealed deposits and artefacts dating to the twelfth century through to the modern period. Evidence of burgage plots was noted. Towards the street frontage archaeological deposits were 0.1m-0.2m below the ground surface, increasing to 0.7m to the rear, east of the property. In 2020 the site remained undeveloped. Reference: Darke and Benson 1993 (29532).
3. A watching brief was maintained during development in 2009 for a new dwelling at land called The Paddocks. Nothing of archaeological interest was noted, with topsoil overlying bedrock. Reference: Shobbrook 2009 (94857).

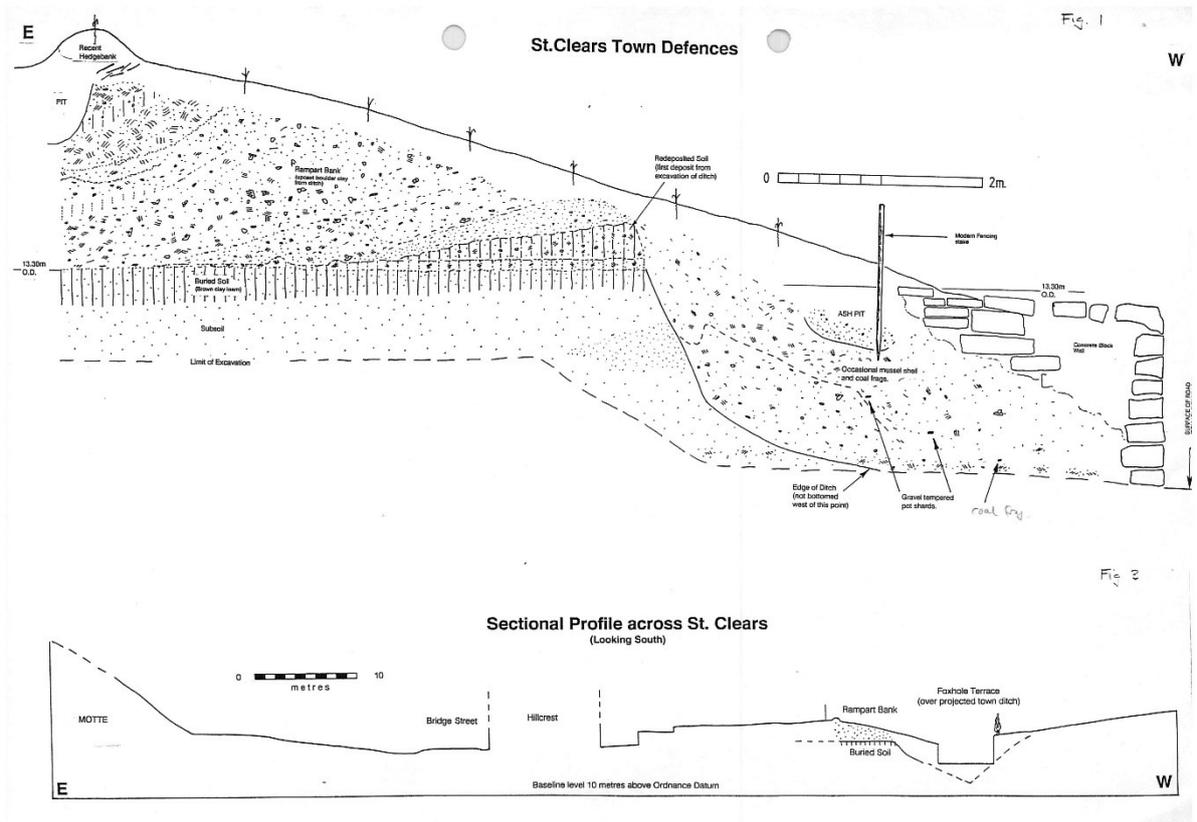


The watching brief in progress at The Paddocks.

4. A geophysical survey undertaken in 2004 on land to the south of St Mary Magdalene's Church revealed considerable activity where the cloisters and other

buildings might be expected, but no clear plan was produced. Reference: Deacon and Evans 2004 (49596).

5. Modern interference may have masked some early features recorded during a geophysical survey undertaken in 2019 to the north of the historic core of the town. Ditches and a small rectangular enclosure or building were detected. Reference: Enright 2019 (118086).
6. Nothing of archaeological interest was noted on a watching brief during installation of playground equipment at St Clears Castle. Reference: Evans 2000 (42778).
7. There have been several episodes of recording and excavation on the earthwork defences on the west side of the town at Foxhole Terrace during levelling of the defensive bank to provide car parking spaces. The first was emergency recording in 1979, followed by further recording in 1989 and then small-scale excavation in 1990. The investigations revealed a substantial clay/earth bank flanked by a large ditch. The bank seemed to be of two phases. Radiocarbon determinations were obtained from charcoal beneath the bank: CAR 1342 900±60 bp, CAR 1343 1630±60 bp and CAR 1345 840±60 bp. These calibrate at 2 sigma to: AD 1020-1250, AD 315-565 and AD1040-1275. The calibrated date of AD 515-565 indicates some Roman/early medieval activity in the area. The other two dates act as a *terminus post quem* for the construction the earthwork bank, ie it must have been built sometime after AD 1020-1250; this fits in with a medieval date for construction. Unfortunately there is no report on the 1990 excavation. Reference: James 1989 (8462), Murphy 1997.



Drawing of the 1989 section through the defensive bank.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL POTENTIAL

St Clears 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).

Small-scale excavation and an evaluation in the historic core of the town demonstrated that archaeological deposits from the twelfth century onwards survive, and there is potential for them to be encountered just about anywhere in this area. The town defences are of special importance and future work on establishing their course on the east and west side of the town would be beneficial.

The potential for surviving medieval and later archaeology along High Street to the south, east and north of St Mary Magdalene Church is also high, but here no archaeological investigations have taken place.

Geophysical survey has demonstrated survival of archaeological features probably associated with the priory to the south of St Mary Magdalene’s Church. Anywhere in the vicinity of the church must be considered of high archaeological potential.

There is the possibility of quays and jetties dating from the twelfth century onwards on the river sides; these areas are of high archaeological potential particularly as waterlogged deposits may survive.

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

Monastic Wales <https://www.monasticwales.org/index.php>

Research framework for the Archaeology of Wales
<https://www.archaeoleg.org.uk/areasouthwest.html>

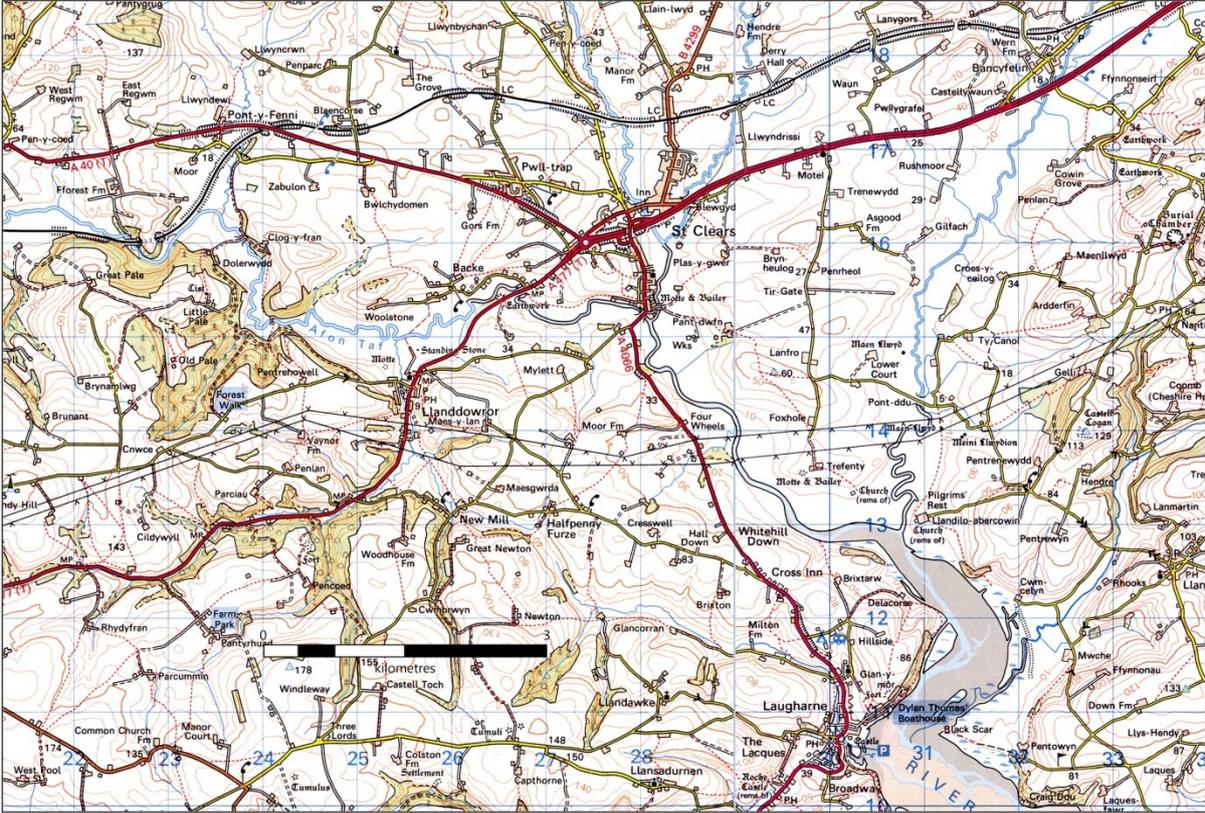


Figure 1. Location map.

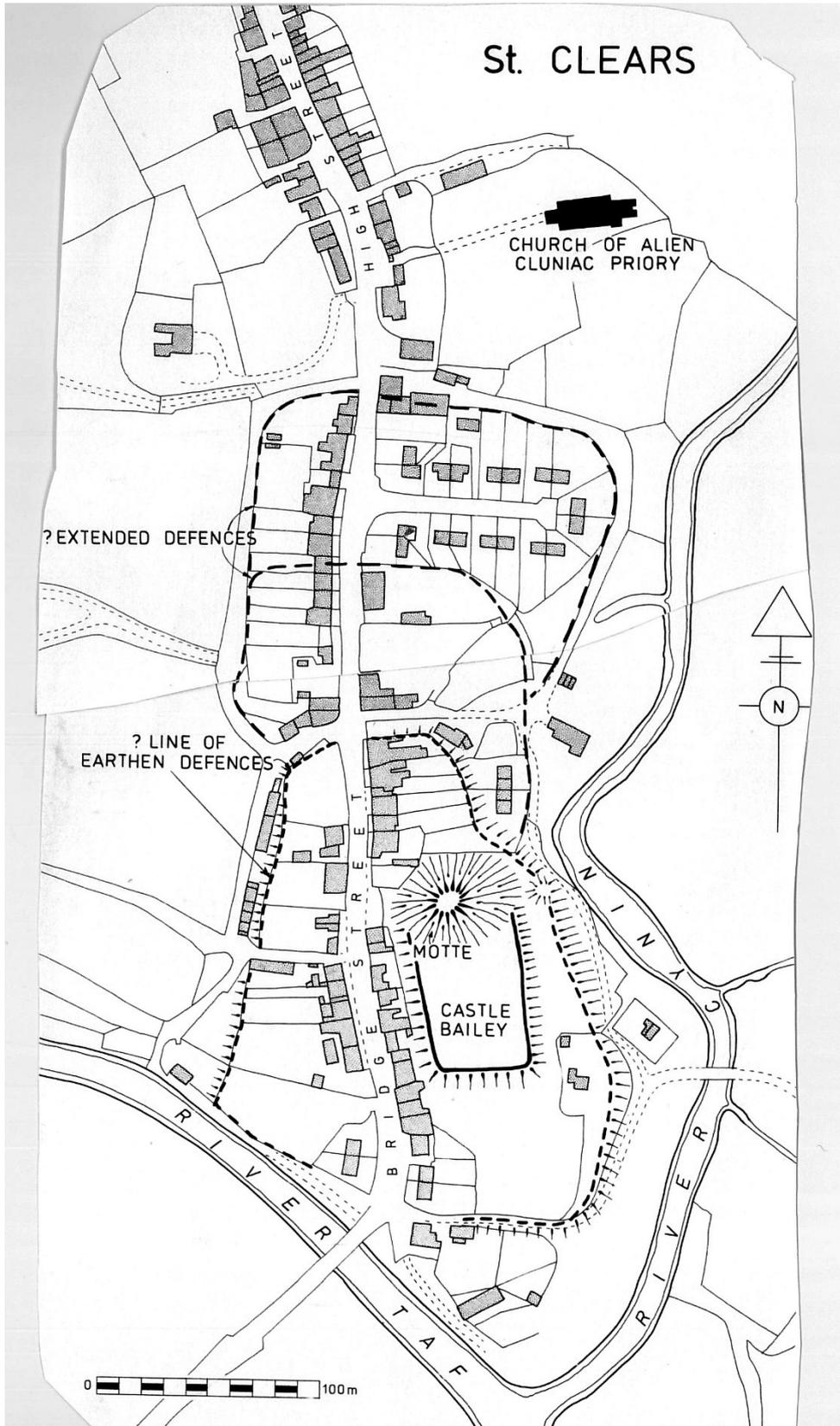


Figure 3. Map of St Clears showing the possible lines of the defences (from Murphy 1997).

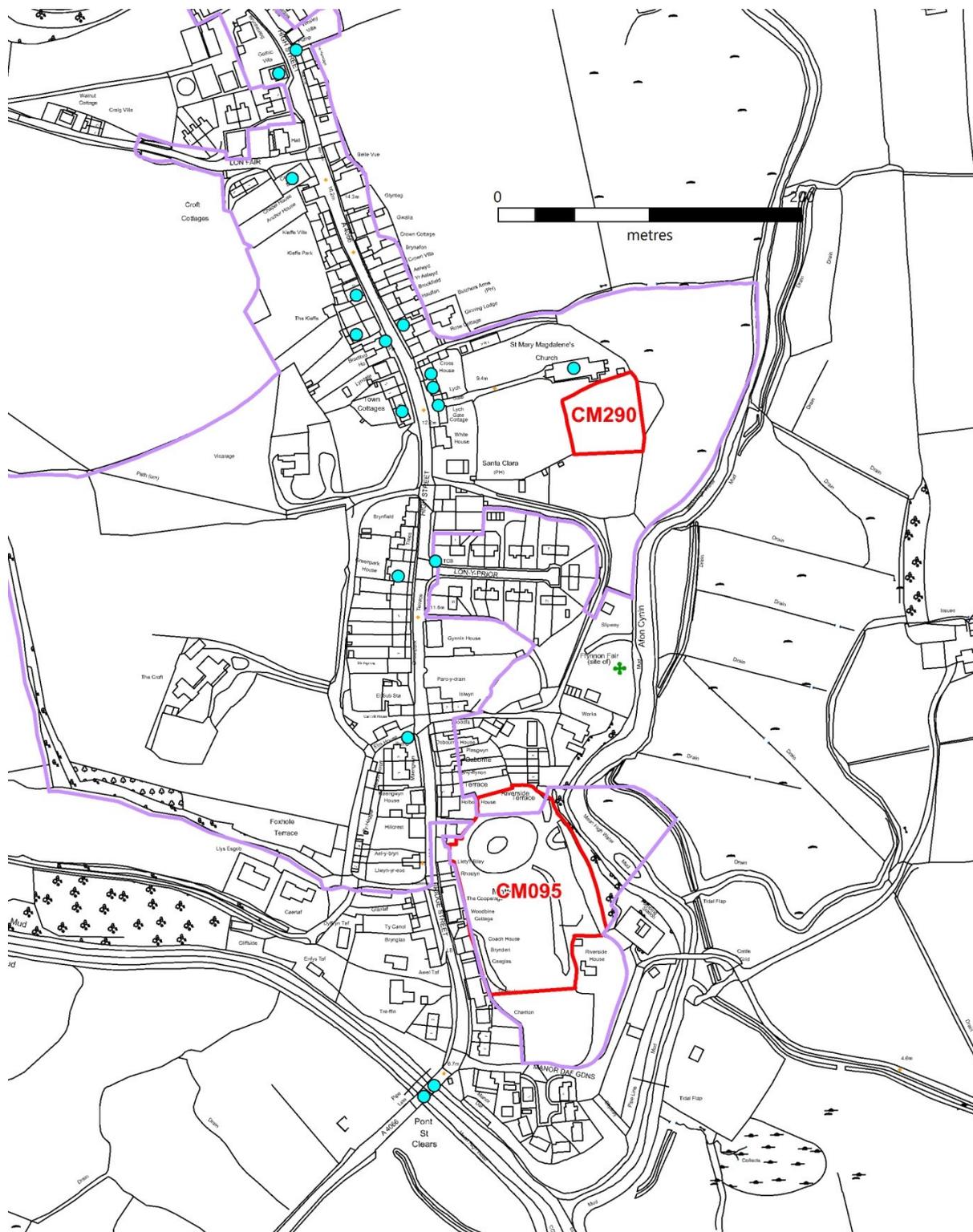


Figure 4. Listed buildings (blue circles), scheduled monuments (outlined in red) and the conservation area (outlined in purple).

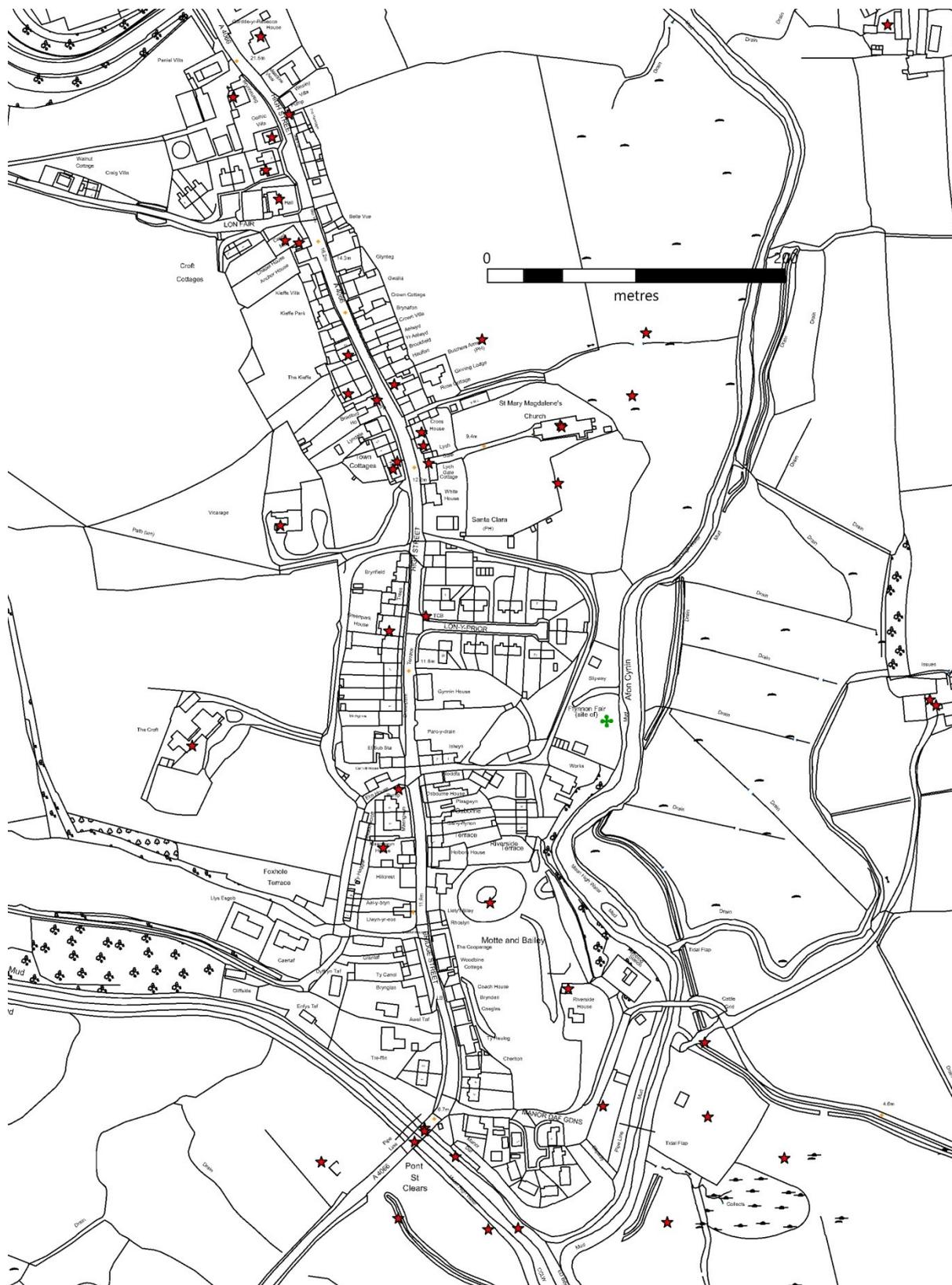


Figure 5. Sites recorded on the Dyfed Historic Environment Record (red stars).

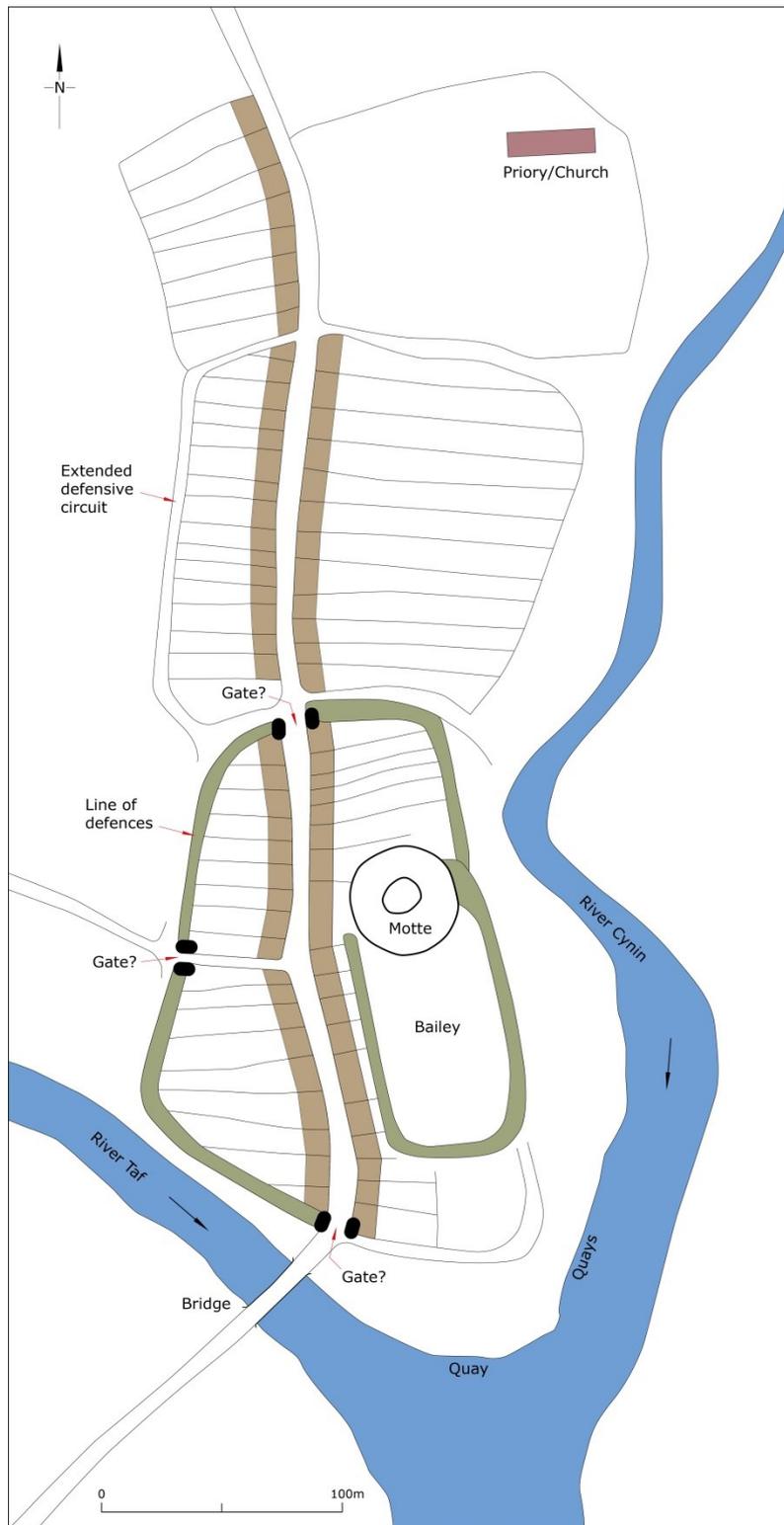


Figure 7. Conjectural plan of St Clears as it may have been at its maximum extent in the medieval period, c.1320.