

# THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE MEDIEVAL TOWNS OF SOUTHWEST WALES

## ST DAVIDS



*Aerial view of the centre of St Davids (DAT AP92-10.6)*

Prepared by Dyfed Archaeological Trust  
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By

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# **ST DAVIDS**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The cathedral dominates St Davids. It is likely that a settlement developed in the early medieval period to serve the religious community, but its location and character is unknown. In 1115 St Davids was granted a town charter and by 1326 130 burgesses lived in the town. This was the high point of the town until its recovery in the nineteenth century. The town has high archaeological potential, but so far only very small investigations have been conducted.

## **KEY FACTS**

Status: 1115 town charter, twice-weekly market, two annual fairs.

Size: 1326, 130 burgesses

Archaeology: No significant archaeological investigations.

## **LOCATION**

St Davids lies in a relatively sheltered location in the west of Pembrokeshire (SM 753 253). It is a city, with the cathedral in its walled close in the valley of the River Alun and the streets and houses of the town to the south and east (Fig. 1).

## **HISTORY**

The history of the town (city as it now is) of St Davids is inextricably linked to the cathedral. A Christian community may have been established at St Davids as early as the sixth century. It is highly likely that a small civil settlement developed to support this early medieval Christian community, but the character and location of such a settlement is unknown.

During their conquest of southwest Wales in the late eleventh/early twelfth centuries the Anglo-Normans established a castle 300m to the west of the cathedral. There is no history attached to the castle, although some writers consider it was built by William the Conqueror when he visited in 1081.

In 1115 King Henry I of England granted a town charter to St Davids and in 1123 Pope Callixtus II declared that two pilgrimages to St Davids was equal to one to Rome. These two events undoubtedly resulted in the rapid commercial and administrative development of the town, although its population in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries is not recorded. In 1281, Bishop Bek granted the town the right to hold twice-weekly markets and two annual fairs. He also founded Whitewell Hospital to the south of the town. In 1326 130 burgesses are recorded, mostly Englishmen. Subdivision of burgages into half and quarter plots recorded at this time is evidence of a long established and

prosperous town. This, however, was the high point of the medieval town, and in common with other communities across Europe it would have suffered population loss during mid-fourteenth century. The town remained in a decayed condition until fairly recent times – John Speed's map of 1610 (Fig. 2) shows about 50 houses and he states St Davids had 'few inhabitants'.

During the nineteenth century vacant plots were filled with new houses (Figs 3 and 4) and in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries new houses and other buildings were constructed on the southern and eastern fringes of the historic core (Fig. 5).

## **MORPHOLOGY**

St David's Cathedral in its walled close occupies a sheltered location in the Alun valley. The town/city lies to the south and east of the valley on relatively flat ground. The town consisted of four main streets, Goat Street, Nun Street, High Street and Tower Hill, all of which converged on a triangular market place with its medieval city/market cross. Initially the town developed organically around Tower Hill and the north side of Goat Street. Analysis of the town's plan reveals formal secondary development with burgages laid out in blocks along Nun Street and High Street, with Back Lane and New Street forming back lanes to these plots. The triangular market place was probably laid out at the same time. Historic maps indicate that the market place was formerly wider and longer. This planned element of the town was certainly established by the early fourteenth century and probably by the end of the twelfth/early thirteenth century.

Despite the depopulation of the town in the fourteenth century the pattern of burgages persisted for several centuries and was depicted on nineteenth century maps (Figs 3 and 4). The 130 burgesses recorded in 1326, which roughly equates to 130 burgages, could easily be accommodated in the four streets mentioned above.

There is no indication that the town was ever provided with defences.

Figure 8 shows St Davids as it may have been in the early fourteenth century.

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

### **Scheduled Monuments**

There are nine scheduled monuments in St Davids. Seven of these are related to the cathedral/cathedral close. Of the other two, one (PE 94) is the medieval city/market cross and one (PE 482) is Whitewell Hospital (Fig. 5).

## **Listed Buildings**

There are approximately 120 listed buildings in St Davids (Fig. 5). Many of these are of buildings and structures in the Cathedral Close. Others are of houses, religious buildings, street furniture and other buildings and structures in the city.

## **Conservation Area**

St Davids lies in the large St Davids Conservation Area (Fig. 5).

## **Registered Parks and Gardens**

There are no registered parks and gardens in St Davids.

## **Registered Historic Landscape**

St Davids lies in the St Davids and Ramsey Island Registered Historic Landscape, within the St Davids historic landscape character area.

## **Undesignated Historic Environment Assets**

There are approximately 220 site and monuments recorded on the regional Historic Environment Record. However, 120 of these are duplicates of the listed buildings and the others are mainly of unlisted nineteenth century and more recent buildings and structures (Fig. 6).

## **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).

Only the archaeological investigations within the town/city are listed below; the numerous investigations within the Cathedral Close are not included.

1. A single evaluation trench excavated on a vacant plot at 39 Goat Street revealed nineteenth and early twentieth century building remains resting on natural deposits and below thin topsoil. Nothing earlier was recorded. The remains correspond to the buildings shown on nineteenth century maps. It is assumed that any pre-nineteenth-century deposits were removed during construction in the early nineteenth century. Reference: Poucher 2013 (105656).





*General view of Goat Street evaluation.*

2. A watching brief was maintained during water-main replacement in High Street, Goat Street and other locations. The work was confined to the roads themselves. Nothing of archaeological interest was noted. Reference: Border Archaeology 2003 (49624).
3. A well-built mortared wall associated with surfaces of post-medieval date was recorded during a watching brief maintained on the excavation of foundations for a new house to the rear of 34-36 High Street. The function of the wall and surfaces was not determined. No medieval deposits were noted. Reference: Zamora 2016 (111376).



*General view of the foundation trench at 34-36 High Street.*



*The wall recorded at 34-36 High Street.*

## **ARCHAEOLOGICAL POTENTIAL**

St Davids has potential for addressing the key agenda item for research into the medieval period of town plantation. It also has the potential to address the post-medieval research theme on settlements (towns).

The few archaeological investigations within St Davids city/town have been small-scale and on the periphery of the historic core and therefore have not assisted in assessing the potential for surviving medieval archaeological deposits. Most of the historic core is built up, with many buildings having listed status, and thus opportunities for archaeological investigation are limited. However, these opportunities should be taken when they arise.

Figure 8 shows the probably extent of St Davids in the early fourteenth century.

## **REFERENCES**

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Lewis S 1833. *A Topographical Dictionary of Wales*, (London: S Lewis).

Manby G W 1801. *History and Antiquaries of the Parish of St David* (London).

Poucher P 2013. 39 Goat Street, St David's, Pembrokeshire: archaeological evaluation, Dyfed Archaeological Trust unpublished report 2013-45.

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

Soulsby I N and Jones D 1977. The archaeological implications of redevelopment in the historic towns of Preseli, Urban Research Unit Department of Archaeology University College Cardiff unpublished report.

Zamora A I 2016. 34-36 High Street, St Davids Pembrokeshire: archaeological watching brief, Archaeology Wales unpublished report 1509.

### **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>



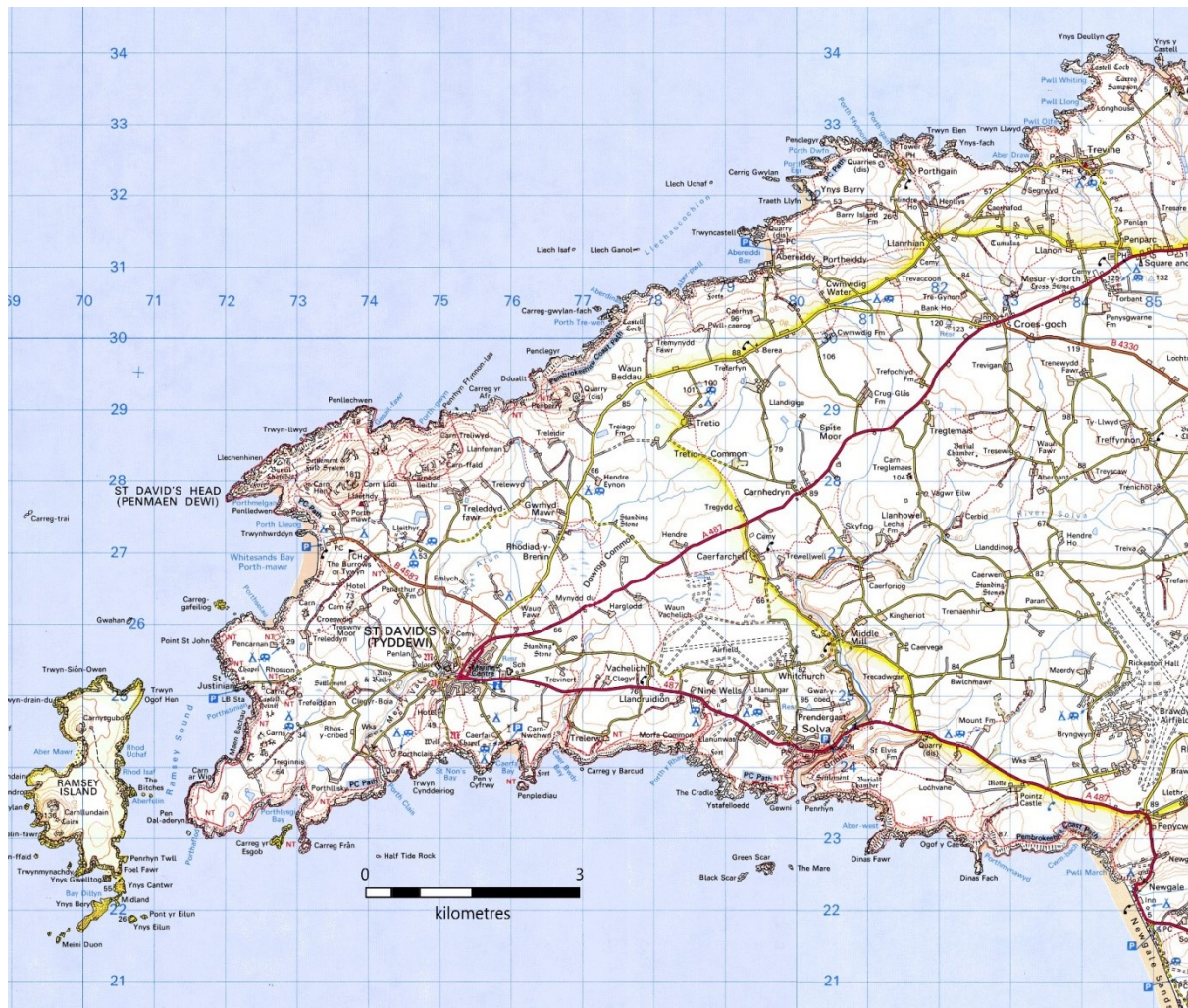


Figure 1. Location map.

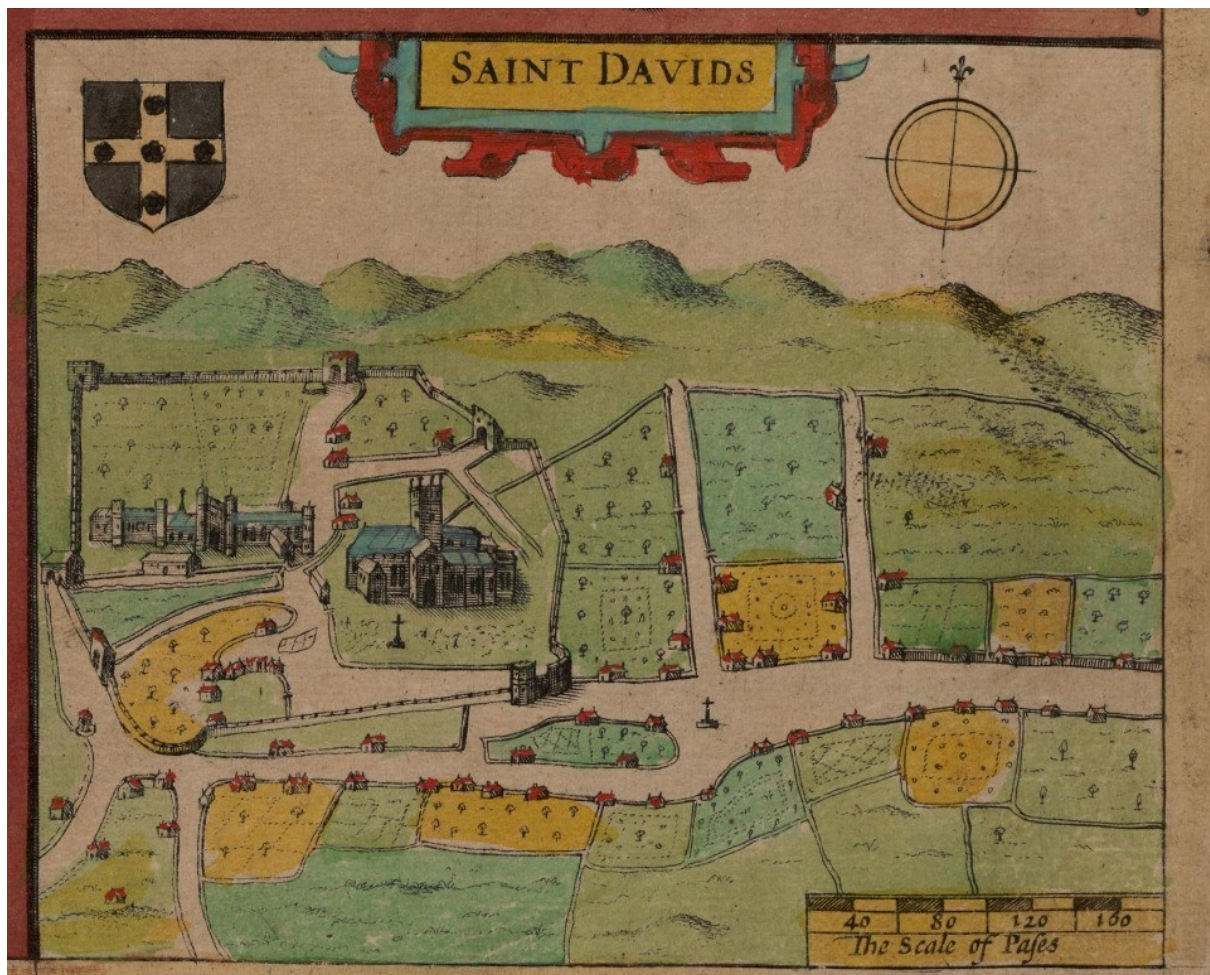


Figure 2. John Speed's 1610 map of St Davids.



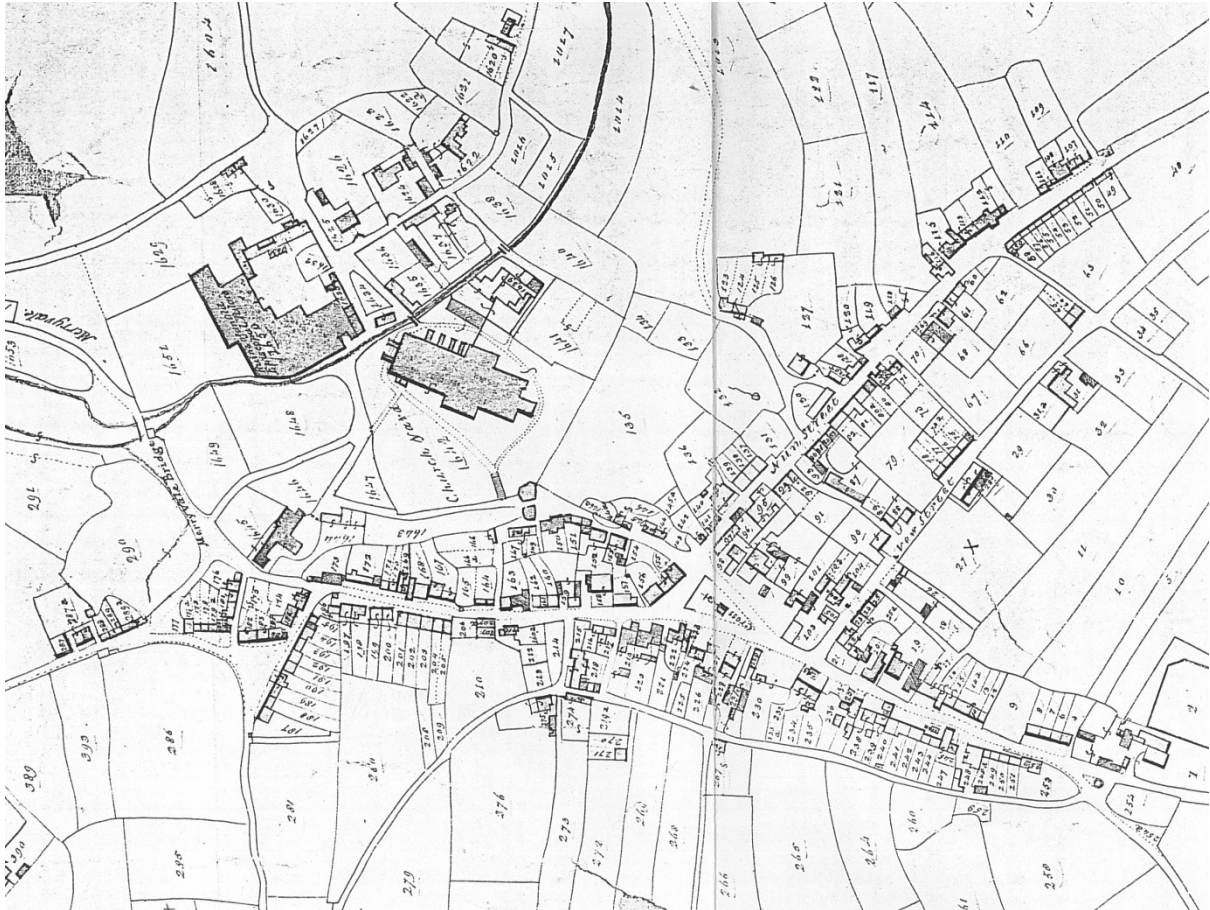


Figure 3. Extract from the 1840 St Davids tithe map.

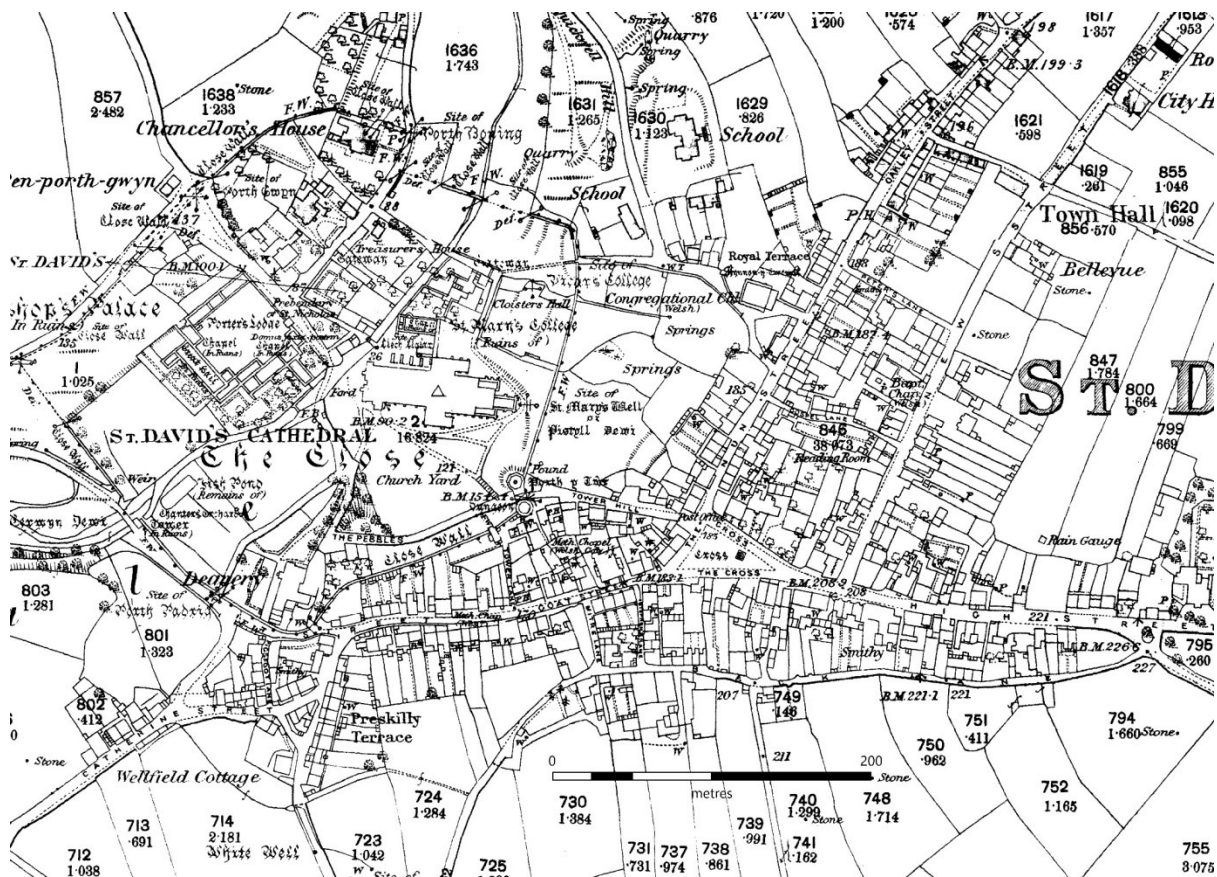
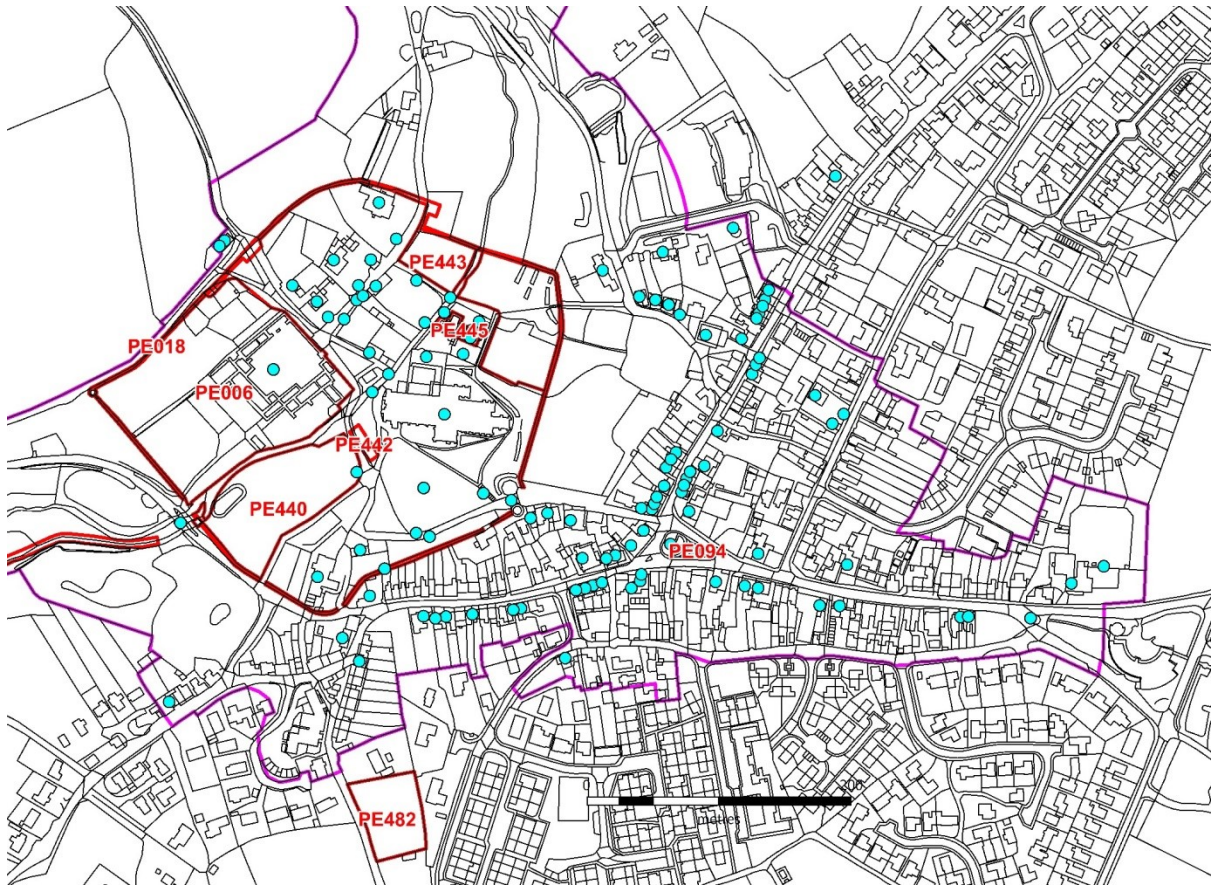


Figure 4. Extract from the 1889 Ordnance Survey 1:2500 1<sup>st</sup> Edition map (Pembrokeshire 14.15 and 20.13).

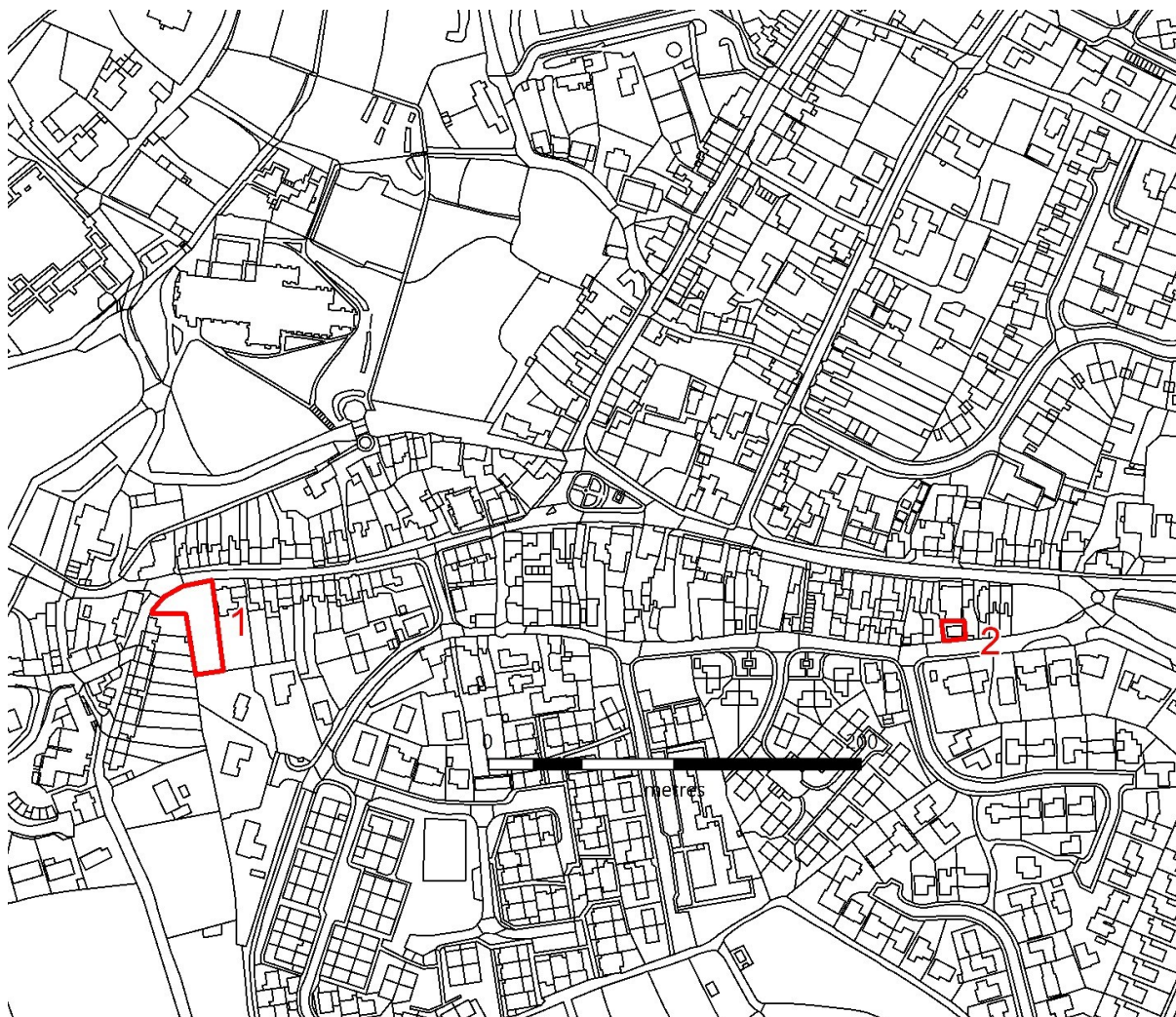


*Figure 5. Listed buildings (blue circles), scheduled sites (red outline) and the conservation area (purple outline).*

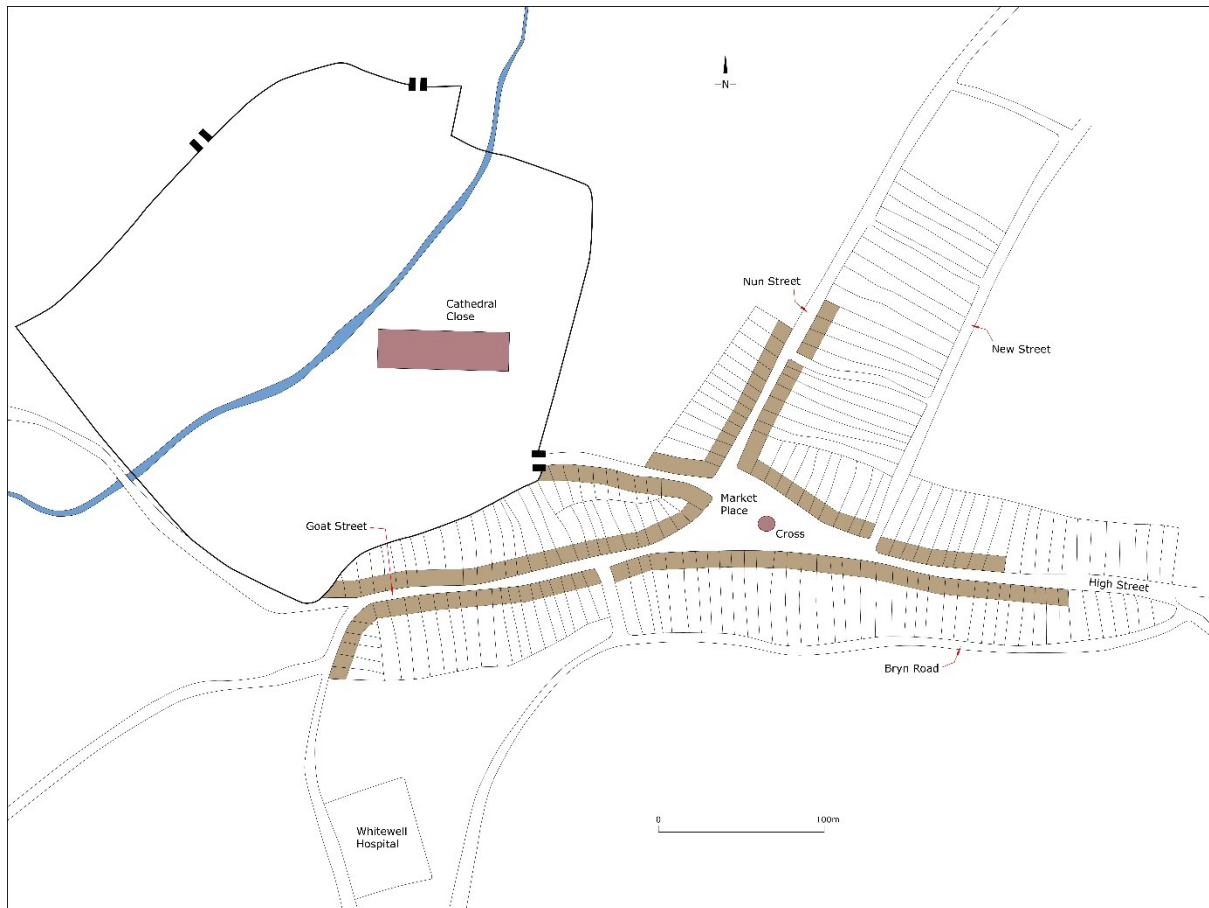




*Figure 6. HER sites.*



*Figure 7. Archaeological interventions.*



*Figure 8. St Davids as it may have been at its maximum extent in the medieval period, c.1320.*