CARMARTHEN CASTLE

Watching brief outside the gatehouse for Western Power, May 2018

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ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF OUTSIDE THE GATEHOUSE, MAY 2018

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FOR WESTERN POWER DISTRIBUTION

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1.0 SUMMARY

In May 2018 a watching brief was undertaken, on behalf of Western Power Distribution, at Carmarthen Castle (NGR SN 413 199; DAT PRN 57; NPRN 95084; SAM Cm 008), as a condition of the Scheduled Ancient Monument consent for the excavation of a new, high-voltage mains joint trench in the scheduled area immediately west of the castle gatehouse. Much of this area was fully excavated by Dyfed Archaeological Trust in 2003. The new joint trench was positioned over the defensive castle ditch, in an area formerly crossed by a medieval timber bridge, supported on two masonry piers that were revealed in 2003.

The 2018 joint trench represented the re-excavation of previous service trench fills, and was located between buried walls and the bridge piers: disturbance was therefore limited and pre-twentieth-century deposits were only encountered at the bottom of the trench. However, they included a possible eighteenth-century ditch fill, and the possible western edge of the medieval defensive ditch itself. This lay between 1.5m and 1.7m east of the eastern edge of Nott Square which, in 2003, had been assumed to follow its line.

Natural soil was encountered 0.50m beneath the surface of Nott Square, suggesting that its eastern edge may historically have lain at a higher level, but was subject to truncation during the post-medieval period.

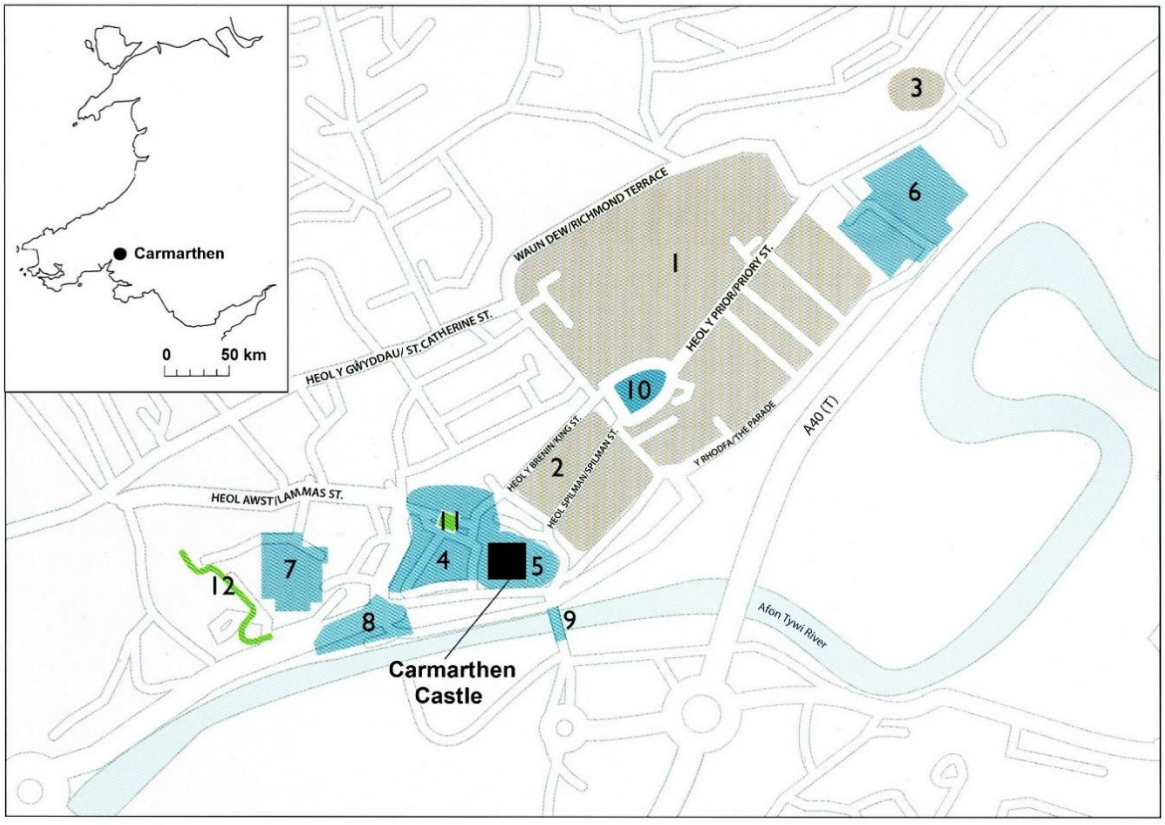
2.0 INTRODUCTION

2.1 Site location

Carmarthen lies between the junction of the River Tywi with two of its tributaries, the Tawelan Brook, one kilometre to the west of the town and the River Gwili, 1.8 kilometres to the east. The solid geology is represented by Ordovician shales of the Arenig system, beneath a drift deposit of stiff glacial boulder clay. Fluvio-glacial activity has left an overlying gravel terrace between the Gwili and the Tywi. Strongly defined, the terrace broadens out to the southwest as a long, low ridge, which lies between 15 and 23 metres above sea level, averages 200 metres in width, and terminates at the bluff on which the castle stands. It forms the spine of the historic town of Carmarthen (Fig. 1), and was a natural choice for defence and settlement.

The castle (NGR SN 413 199) lies at an average height of 22 metres above sea level, with a steep southerly downhill slope towards the River Tywi and overlooking its lowest bridging point. Underlying natural deposits almost entirely comprise clean, loose fluvio-glacial gravels.

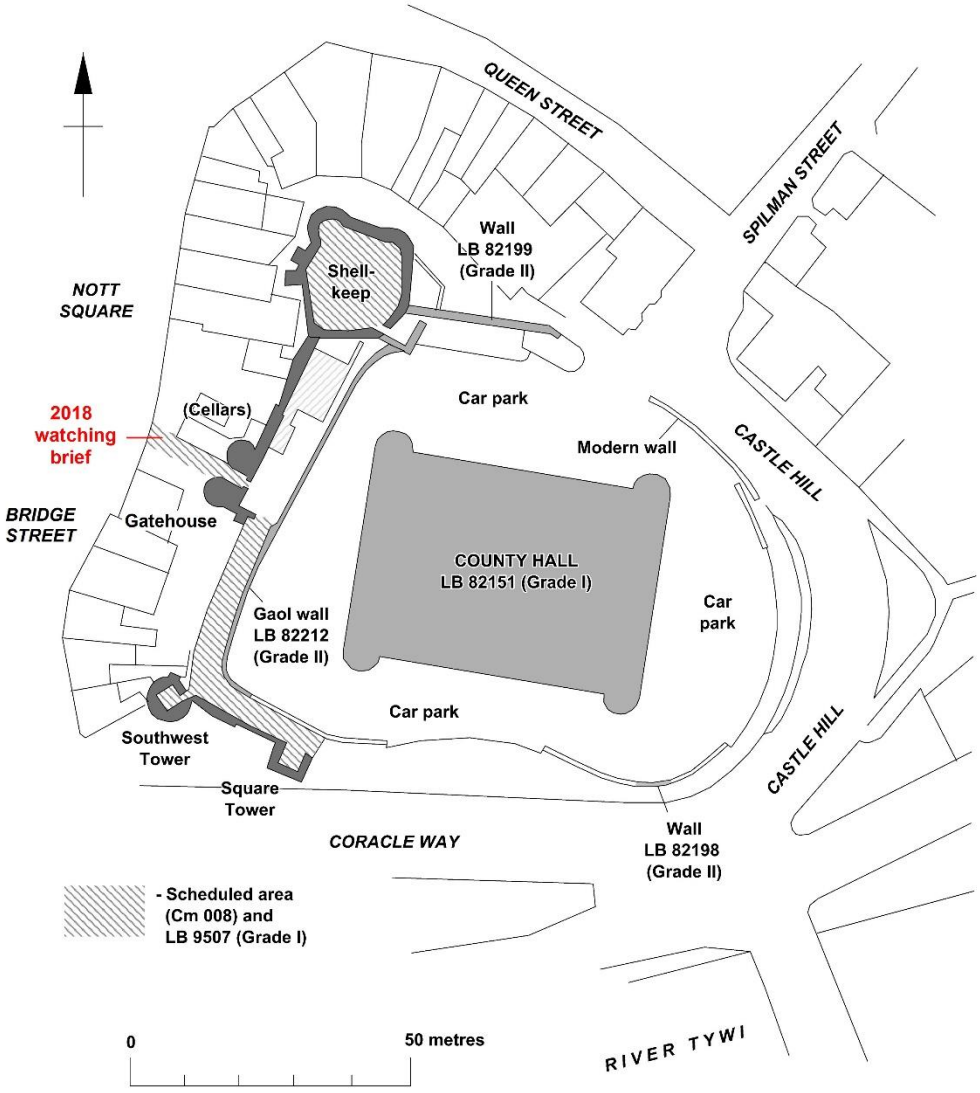
Fig. 1 – Site location map



Carmarthen - historic features

1 - Roman Town
2 - Roman Fort
3 - Roman amphitheatre
4 - Medieval town wall
5 - Medieval castle
6 - Medieval priory
7 - Medieval friary
8 - Town quay
9 - Bridge
10 - Parish church (St Peter)
11 - Guildhall
12 - Civil War defences

Fig. 2 – Plan of Carmarthen Castle showing location of 2018 watching brief and scheduled area



2.2 Site history

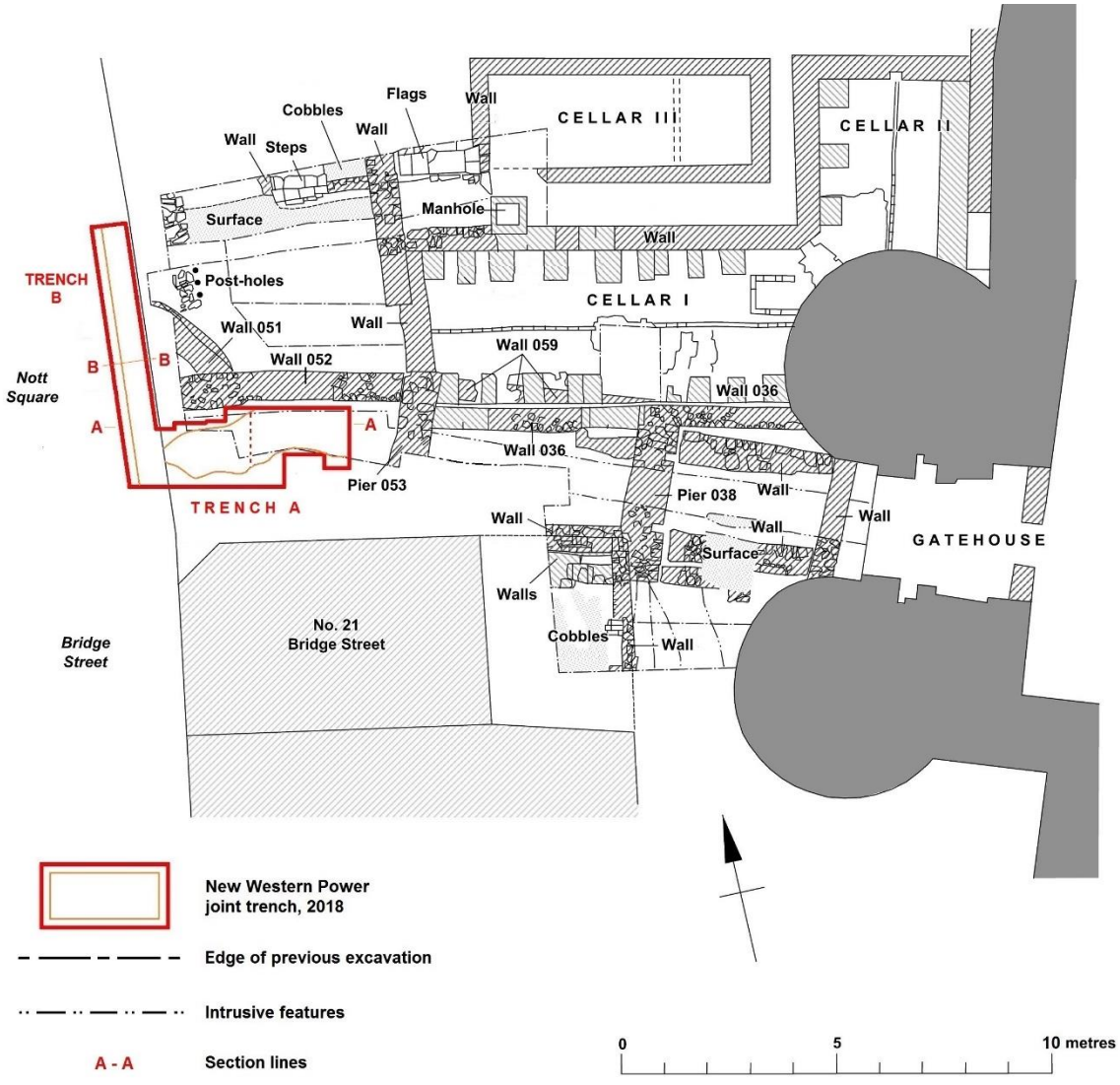
Carmarthen Castle (DAT PRN 57; NPRN 95084) was one of the principal castles of medieval Wales, and among the largest. A springboard for the Anglo-Norman annexation of southwest Wales, it became the centre of crown authority in the region and was one of a very small number of royal castles in an area predominantly given over to marcher lordships. Primarily a centre of government, it was also the hub around which the medieval walled town of Carmarthen developed, and still dominates the townscape.

The castle was established as an earthwork motte-and-bailey in *c*.1106, and was progressively remodelled in stone from around the 1180s onwards. Much of what we see today results from rebuilding in 1409-11, after damage sustained during the Glyndŵr rebellion, including the gatehouse. The castle appears to have been partially slighted after the Civil War (1642-

48) but, like many royal castles, its remains continued to be used for civil administration and it is still the site of a centre of government. It was used as the County Gaol throughout the post-medieval period, but was acquired by Carmarthenshire County Council in the twentieth century when the gaol was replaced by the present County Hall (1939-55).

Although repair and maintenance work had been undertaken by the council since the late 1960s, the castle had seen little archaeological investigation prior to 1993 when a large-scale programme of enhancement got under way, continuing until 2006. The scheme was accompanied by a full programme of archaeological recording, undertaken by Dyfed Archaeological Trust (DAT), under the overall supervision of Neil Ludlow: this has been brought to full publication (Ludlow 2014).

Fig. 3 – Carmarthen Castle: plan of 2018 joint trench relative to excavated features



2.3 Site description (Figs. 2 and 3)

The watching brief took place between the castle gatehouse and Nott Square – the early marketplace of the medieval town. This area was subject to full excavation, by Duncan Schlee of DAT, in 2003 (Schlee 2004). The work showed that the flagged pathway currently running between Nott Square and the gatehouse follows the line of a medieval bridge, crossing a former defensive ditch. The bridge was of timber, supported on two masonry piers (numbered *038* and *053* on Figs. 3, 5 and 6).

The ditch was progressively infilled and built over during the post-medieval domestic development of Nott Square and Bridge Street. This development included three eighteenth-century cellars, which were built within the ditch; the long south wall *036* of the southernmost cellar incorporated the ends of the two medieval bridge piers (Cellar I on Figs. 3, 5 and 6), replacing an earlier post-medieval domestic wall *059*, while a further eighteenth-century wall *052* ran westwards to the ditch edge. The properties overlying the cellars to the north of the bridge were demolished in the 1970s; all surviving walling here lies beneath today's ground level. The property to the south, No. 21 Bridge Street, also overlies a cellar and is still standing, although its rear half was demolished in 2002.

The line of the bridge, historically, represented the only direct access from Nott Square to the gatehouse. This means that it was also the line taken by services to and from the castle site and its environs. Much of this line is therefore heavily disturbed by pipe- and cable-trenches – many of them live – and could not be fully excavated in 2003.

3.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Among the services running between Nott Square and the castle gatehouse is part of the high-voltage electrical ring-main serving Carmarthen, connecting with a substation within the castle curtilage. This was partly excavated for renewal in 2002 (watched by Pete Crane of DAT). However, an upgrade was required, with a new electrical joint.

Carmarthen Castle is a Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM Cm 008; see Fig. 2). The client, Western Power Distribution, accordingly sought scheduled monument consent (SMC) to re-excavate the cable trench and install new cabling and jointing. This was granted 11 January 2017, with the condition that an archaeological watching brief be maintained during trench excavation.

The aim of the watching brief was to –

- Monitor the excavation of the new joint trench.
- Minimise disturbance to any *in situ* archaeological features and deposits.
- Record the character, extent and significance of any archaeological features and deposits.
- Collate the data retrieved during the fieldwork into a structured archive.
- Prepare of a report based on the results of the above.

4.0 METHODOLOGIES AND RESULTS

The new joint trench for Western Power was located between Nott Square and the castle gatehouse, on the line of the medieval bridge and partly overlying the former defensive ditch. It lay west of the western masonry bridge pier *053*, and between buried wall *052* and the standing building at No. 21 Bridge Street (Fig. 3).

The area occupied by the joint trench was partly excavated in 2002 for mains renewal, and had been partly encroached upon by the 2003 excavation.

4.1 The groundworks

Excavation began with the lifting of modern surfacing, which comprised brick paviours in Nott Square (laid in the late 1990s) and limestone flags within the castle curtilage east of the street-side (laid in the mid-2000s).

For safety reasons, the trench was largely excavated with hand-tools, with the initial assistance of a jack-hammer. A 360º mini-digger, with an untoothed bucket, was used where clearance was sufficient around the existing cables and other services.

The trench was L-shaped. Its main body (**Trench A**) lay east-west and averaged 4.3m long (E-W) and 1.4m wide (N-S) at the surface. A live water-main, and a drainage culvert, along the southern half limited the extent of excavation here, and so the trench narrowed to a width of 1.0m beneath the modern surfacing. The trench was not excavated to a pre-determined depth: the aim was to reveal the existing power cables, and then provide a reasonable working space around them. The bottom was therefore uneven, but averaged 0.90m in depth at the east end, and 0.80m in depth in the western half.

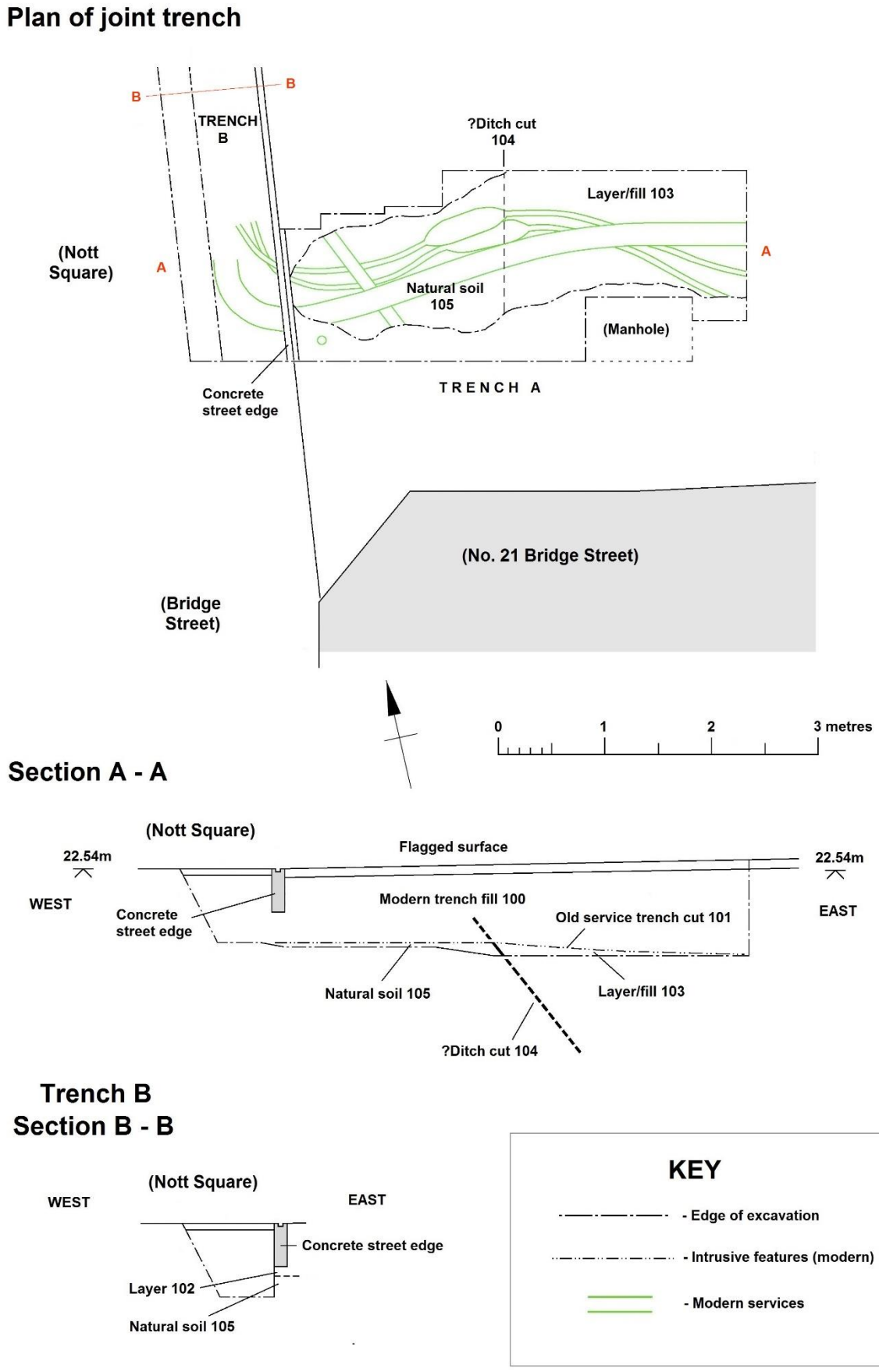
At the west end of Trench A, a shallower N-S trench (**Trench B**) led northwards along the eastern edge of Nott Square for 3.94m. It was 0.90m wide narrowing to 0.60m at the bottom, and averaged 0.70m in depth.

Most of the deposits encountered represented modern fills of the various service trenches across the site. Earlier deposits and features were, however, exposed in the bottom of Trench A. Nevertheless the limited area that was revealed, the physical constraints within the excavated area, and successive disturbances to these earlier horizons made their full characterisation impossible.

4.2 Results (Fig. 4, and appendix)

The latest features comprised the late twentieth-/twenty-first-century surfaces mentioned above, which averaged 0.10m in thickness. They were separated by concrete edging running north-south along the east side of Nott Square, laid in the mid-2000s; it descended to a depth of 0.45m, concealing the features and deposits in the upper half of the eastern section of the trench.

Fig. 4 – Plan and sections of the Western Power joint trench, May 2018



Beneath these modern surfaces lay, in sequential order –

Context *100* (Trench A and B) – This was a loose, very mixed deposit which, in Trench A, partly represents the backfill of the 2002 cable trench re-excavation, and the backfill of the 2003 archaeological excavation (the geotextile sheeting over which was exposed in part of the northern section; see photographs at the end of this report). The remainder represents backfill of the various earlier service trenches running through the site (which are grouped together as cut feature *101* below). Though mixed, it was clearly-defined and contained modern refuse. Its average depth was 0.80m (Fig. 4).

Context *101* (Trench A) – This was a cut, and represents the base of the various twentieth- and twenty-first-century service trenches running east-west through Trench A, between the castle gatehouse and Nott Square. Its present level, which lay at an average depth of 0.80m beneath the surface, may have been defined before the latest re-cut in 2002. It was filled by backfill *100* (Fig. 4).

Context *102* (Trench B) – This was a deposit that was only seen in the eastern section of Trench B, immediately beneath the foot of the concrete street edging at a depth of 0.45m-0.50m. It was a black, loamy material averaging 0.05m in thickness which, in the limited exposure, could not be properly characterised. It directly overlay the natural soil *105* (Fig. 4).

Context *103* (Trench A) – This was a deposit occupying the eastern half of Trench A, where it had been truncated by earlier service trenches *101*. It was only seen in the very bottom of the trench, at a depth of 0.80m-0.85m. It was a black, loamy material, similar to context 102, but was only partly revealed and not be properly characterised. It may have been a fill of the possible ditch *104* (Fig. 4).

Context *104* (Trench A) – This was a possible cut feature (Fig. 4). It represents the edge between deposit *103* and the natural soil *105*, at a depth of 0.80m, and may therefore be the western edge of the medieval defensive castle ditch revealed during the 2003 excavations (see Section 5.0 below).

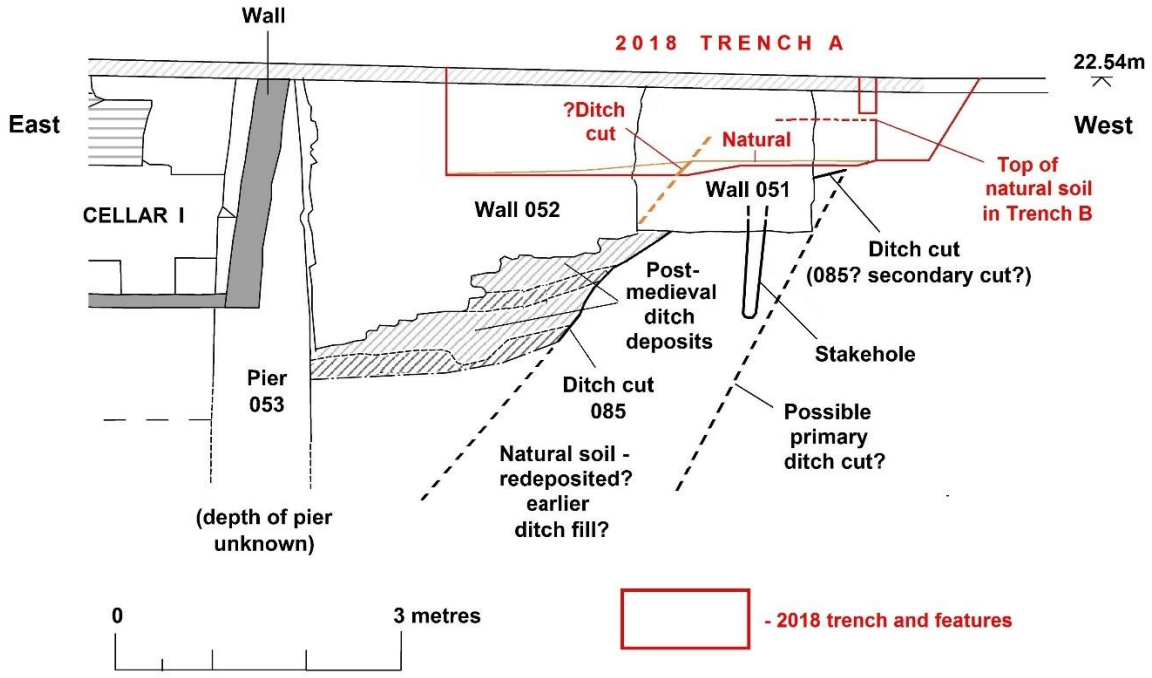
Context *105* (Trench A and B) – This was a deposit occupying the western half of Trench A, where it had been truncated by earlier service trenches *101* to lie at an average depth of 0.80m, near the bottom of the trench. It also occurred along the eastern edge of Trench B, north of buried east-west wall *052*, at the higher level of 0.50m (beneath deposit *102*). It descended to the bottom of both trenches (Fig. 4). It comprised loose, clean, sterile gravels in a yellow-grey matrix, and clearly represented the natural soil.

Apart from some modern engineer's refuse, no finds, artefacts or ecofacts were observed during the groundworks.

5.0 DISCUSSION (Figs. 5 and 6)

The results can be assessed alongside the results of the 2003 excavation. Recording in 2003 was chiefly confined to the excavated area immediately north of Trench A, from which it was separated by the post-medieval, east-west wall *052* (Fig. 3). The junction between the two areas was concealed behind the concrete street edging along the east side of Nott Square. Nevertheless, the archaeological sequence seems to tally between the two areas (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5 – Section through the 2003 excavated area relative to the 2018 joint trench section

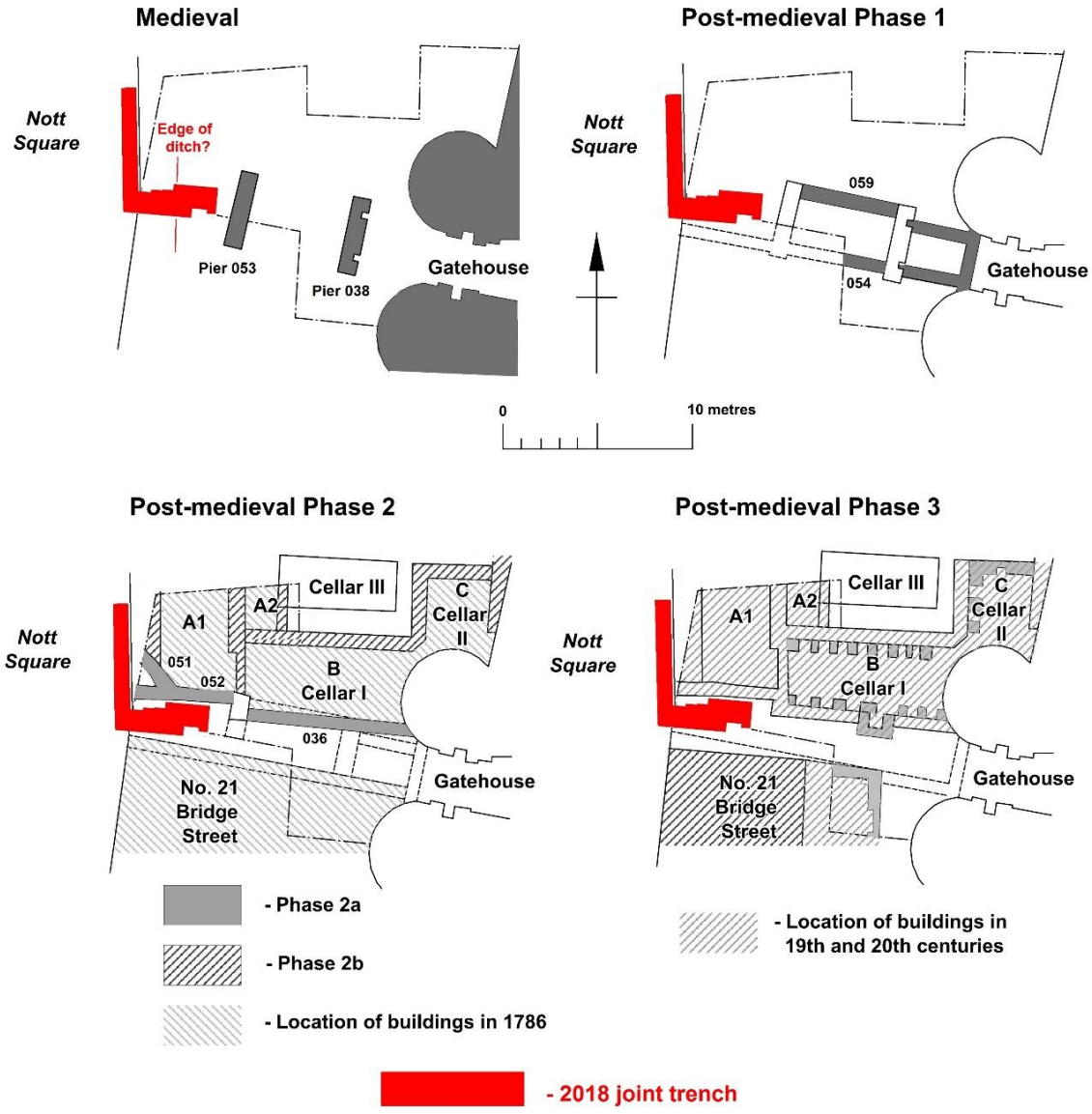


In both, the earliest deposit encountered was the natural soil (2018 context *105*). It was felt, in 2003, that this may have been redeposited subsoil, filling the western side of an earlier, wider and steeper defensive ditch (Schlee 2004, 24; see Fig. 5). However, the deposit observed in 2018 appeared to be entirely sterile, and typical of natural fluvio-glacial gravels. Owing to the constraints described above, no cut features – post-holes, stakeholes etc. as revealed in 2003 (Figs. 3 and 5) – could be observed within it.

The surface of this natural soil, where exposed in Trench B (Nott Square), lay 0.50m beneath the present surface – that is, 0.25m higher than in Trench A where it had been truncated by previous service trenches (Fig. 4). The level of the natural soil in Trench B therefore represents the lowest point from which the medieval ditch can have been cut, and the lowest possible level of the surface of Nott Square itself during the medieval period. It is apparent therefore that some post-medieval truncation of horizons must have occurred here. Nott Square clearly sloped much more steeply downhill to the west during the medieval and early post-medieval periods: rapid survey in 1994 by the author and Gavin Evans (Carmarthen Museum), of No. 5 St Mary's Street, 30 metres west of the watching brief site, revealed an external doorway threshold, of probable sixteenth-century date, two metres beneath present road level.

The western, external edge of the defensive ditch had been thought, as a result of the 2003 excavations, to correspond more-or-less with the eastern edge of Nott Square and Bridge Street (Schlee 2004, 24). However, if 2018 context *104* does represent the ditch edge, then it lay further east – perhaps between 1.5m and 1.7m east of Nott Square. Nevertheless, comparison between the 2003 and 2018 sections, situated north and south of post-medieval cellar wall *052* respectively, shows that the suggested edge *104* more-or-less corresponds with the main body of the ditch cut *085* (Fig. 5). While the latter appears to become shallower towards the top, sloping towards Nott Square (see Fig. 5), this upper part may represent a secondary cut associated with post-medieval development – in particular, east-west wall *052* and the abutting diagonal wall *051* (Figs. 3, 5 and 6). No evidence for these walls was observed in the eastern section of Trench B, where their truncated remains partly lie behind the concrete edging of Nott Square, while the evidence suggests that they probably run out against the slope of the secondary(?) ditch cut, just to the east of Trench B (Figs. 3, 5 and 6).

Fig. 6 – Phase plans of the 2018 watching brief area



The deposits of black loamy material, *102* and *103*, were only partially exposed and could not be fully characterised. However, they appeared post-medieval in nature and were similar overall to deposits excavated at this level in 2003, which could be dated to the late-eighteenth-century and later. It appears that deposit *103* may partly occupy the body of the defensive ditch; in this, it also has parallels in the 2003 excavation where similar black deposits showed that the ditch remained partly open until the late eighteenth century.

The 2018 joint trenches were located just a little too far north to confirm the suggested line of No. 21 Bridge Street as it existed before its rebuild, on a different line, in the nineteenth century (see Fig. 6).

6.0 CONCLUSION

The 2018 Western Power joint trench represented the re-excavation of previous service trench fills, and was located between buried walls and the bridge piers: disturbance was therefore limited and pre-twentieth-century deposits were only encountered at the bottom of the trench. However, they included a possible eighteenth-century ditch fill, and the possible western edge of the medieval defensive ditch itself. This lay between 1.5m and 1.7m east of the eastern edge of Nott Square which, in 2003, had been assumed to follow its line.

Natural soil was encountered 0.50m beneath the surface of Nott Square, suggesting that its eastern edge may historically have lain at a higher level, but was subject to truncation during the post-medieval period.

7.0 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to staff of Western Power and Balfour Beatty for all their help and good-humoured tolerance during the watching brief, particularly John Yeeles (Western Power).

8.0 REFERENCES

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Schlee, D., 2004 'Carmarthen Castle: excavations outside the gatehouse, June-August 2003' (unpublished Dyfed Archaeological Trust report; copy held in DAT Historic Environment Record, report no. 2004/22).

APPENDIX – PHOTOGRAPHS

Photo 1 – Trench A, looking east towards the castle gatehouse at commencement of excavation

Photo 2 – Trench A, looking west during excavation

Photo 3 – Trench A, looking northeast during excavation

Photo 4 – Trench A, looking east at completion of excavation

Photo 5 – Trench A, looking north at completion of excavation

Photo 6 – Trench A, looking southwest at completion of excavation

Photo 8 – Trench B, looking north during excavation

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