

EXCAVATIONS AT 29 HIGH STREET,  
CAERNARFON

INTERIM REPORT NO. 77

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Ymddiriedolaeth Archaeolegol Gwynedd  
Gwynedd Archaeological Trust

# EXCAVATIONS AT 29 HIGH STREET, CAERNARFON

INTERIM REPORT

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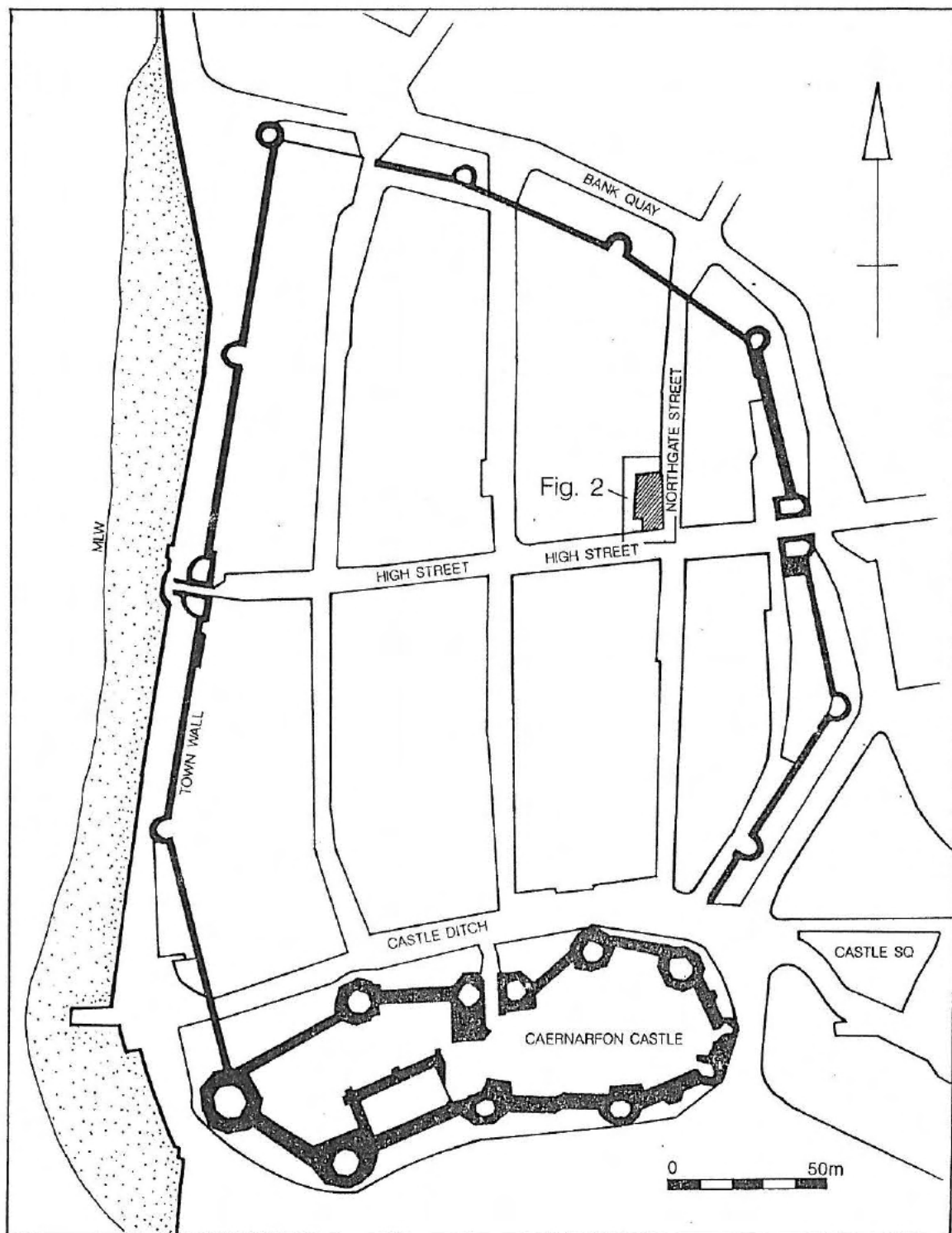


Fig. 1 Caernarfon town and location map.

# RESCUE EXCAVATIONS AT 29 HIGH STREET, CAERNARFON, GWYNEDD: AN INTERIM REPORT

*Summary* Excavations at 29 High Street, Caernarfon have revealed the remains of a light wattle and daub structure of possible Medieval date. Also several pits which contained Medieval pottery sherds. Stone-built foundations were revealed relating to post-Medieval occupation of the site.

## 1. Introduction

In March 1993, assessment excavations were carried out at the former 29 High Street (SH 4785 6282) within the Edwardian Walled Town of Caernarfon, Gwynedd. The work was undertaken by the Gwynedd Archaeological Trust (GAT) in advance of a proposed housing development by Cwmni Tref Caernarfon.

The assessment consisted of two hand dug trial trenches (sampling approximately 10% of the available area), as well as the recording of deposits afforded by the demolition of the cellarge belonging to the former building occupying the High Street frontage. The assessment revealed a deep (c.0.50m) buried soil layer associated with a horizon of burnt material, and medieval pottery. Overlying this sequence was a succession of demolition deposits and possible occupation layers.

Sufficient archaeological evidence was therefore recovered to warrant more extensive excavation of the site in advance of the development. As no developer funding was available this work was supported by Cadw (Welsh Historic Monuments).

The aim of this short statement is to summarise the initial results of the excavation. Post-excavation work and specialist reports will however be required before it will be possible to state confidently the full significance of the work.

## 2. Historical and Archaeological Background

The archaeological and historical importance of Caernarfon is firmly acknowledged. It is designated a World Heritage Site comprising the Castle and Town Walls which are in the direct care of the state as Scheduled Ancient Monuments. Several listed buildings are also located within the walled town. Before the establishment of the Edwardian borough in the late 13th century, Caernarfon was an important Welsh administrative centre with a royal court (llys) and settlements of the King's tenants (maerdref). The exact location of these is unknown. Many of the existing structures in the town were demolished at the time of Edward I's invasion and much of the stonework used in construction of the town walls.

Following the building of the castle, a walled town was added with 70 burgage plots laid out. The configuration of the medieval town is largely preserved in the present street pattern (see fig. 1). However, the scale of Georgian and Victorian development, particularly the introduction of extensive cellarge, has rendered much of the area within the town walls archaeologically sterile.

Archaeological investigations within the town walls have produced little evidence of the medieval occupation of the town for either the pre-Edwardian or Edwardian periods. In particular, excavations at Shirehall Street (1980) and at Northgate Street (1990) revealed that the survival of deposits earlier than the post-medieval period was rare. In the case of the Shirehall excavations features dating to the early 14th century did survive but away from the street frontage. At Northgate Street however nothing remained earlier than the 18th century. In general the evidence suggests a significant reduction in ground level in the early years of the 18th century within the town walls, most likely associated with major development taking place in the town at this time.

The positive results obtained during the initial investigations at 29 High Street were therefore of particular significance. It appeared that archaeological deposits of the medieval period might have escaped destruction in this part of the town. Therefore, it was hoped, the site presented the heretofore rare opportunity to record surviving evidence of medieval occupation within the walled town.

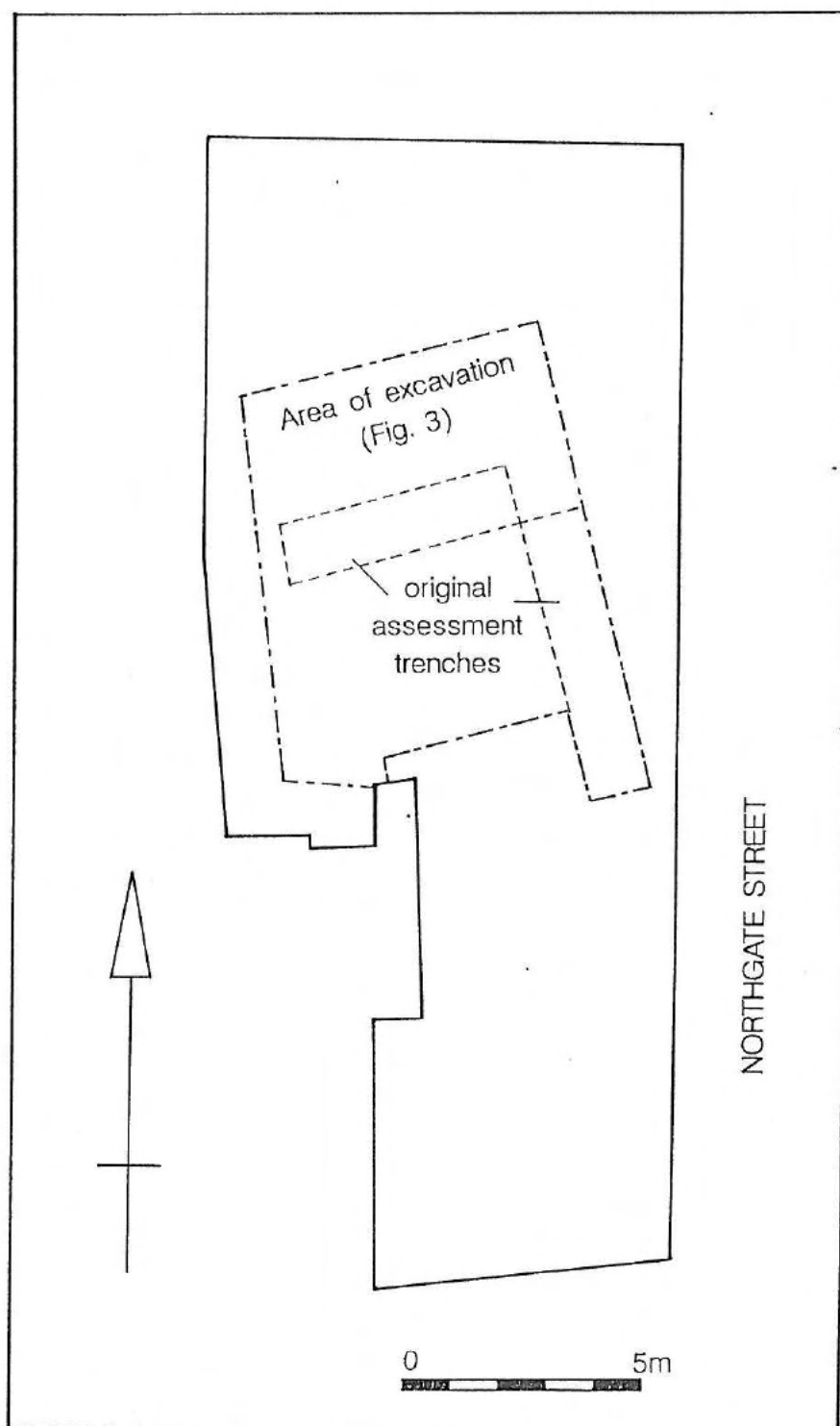


Fig. 2 Location of excavated area.

### 3. Method and Aims

An area 8.0m by 6.5m was excavated by hand within the area of proposed development (see fig. 2). This involved the re-excavation of the assessment trenches, and their subsequent extension.

The size of the excavated area was dictated by two constraints. The need to locate spoil within the development plot and the amount of available funds to carry out the work. The trench was located so as to maximise the potential for identification of structural remains on the street-frontage as well as secondary features in the area behind. It was felt that the selected area, although representing less than the total available, would permit an adequate record to be made of the main components of the surviving archaeological sequence on the site.

Detailed recording by scaled plan and section drawing, photography (black and white prints, and colour slides), and written descriptions on standard context forms was carried out on all relevant deposits and features. Finds were plotted three dimensionally where typologically significant or closely datable. Samples were also recovered for dating and environmental purposes.

### 4. The Excavations

The excavation results are illustrated in figure 3.

The natural subsoil varied from a bright yellowish brown sandy silt clay to a firm greyish yellow clay with orange mottling. The natural deposit was not exposed over the entire area of the trench, however, information gained from section analysis and from those areas that were fully excavated indicated the general character of the subsoil as gently undulating with occasional pockets of clean loose gravel deposits.

Over the extent of the excavation the subsoil was found to be sealed by a deposit of friable orangey brown silty clay (008). This decreased in depth from c.0.50m at the south of the trench to c.0.25m at the north extent of the site. A flint thumb nail scraper was recovered from the surface of this context. This find, along with other struck flint flakes and pottery sherds residual from later contexts, indicates some level of pre-historic or Roman activity in the area of the present site.

The earliest features on the site were several shallow cuts in the surface of layer 008: features 111, 113, and 114 (see Figure 3). These were sealed by a large spread of burnt debris comprising an abundance of small charcoal fragments and scorched daub. Within this layer were found many corroded iron nails and occasional large pieces of carbonised timber. Careful excavation of this deposit revealed a faint regular pattern to the charcoal with fragments overlying one another at right angles forming a 'weave' effect suggestive of wattling. A coin was recovered from below this destruction horizon. This along with numerous finds of medieval pottery recovered from the area should give an accurate date for these deposits.

Features identified as being contemporary with this phase, through stratigraphic and finds evidence, are represented by two large pits cut through the same horizon 008 at the north end of the excavated area. 079 a large sub-circular feature partly overlaid by a recent wall foundation (039), was not fully excavated. A linear box section positioned to sample this feature established it to be a flat-bottomed steeply sided cut 0.25m deep. Of unknown use or function, the feature contained medieval pottery within its fill.

A larger pit, 078, appeared to cut 079 on its north eastern edge. This feature, an irregularly shaped, steep-sided, pit was approximately 2.0m wide at its maximum. The pit was found to be 0.5m in depth with a fairly level bottom. Four definable dumps and tips filled the feature. In general these were composed of large amounts of stone, broken stone, and waste slate.





Fig. 3 Excavated features.

Numerous medieval finds were recovered from this feature including pottery sherds, and a brass object resembling a large buckle pin.

A further small pit (082) cut the burnt debris layer 009. An irregularly shaped oval cut, the feature measured approximately 1.0m by 0.8m the pit was steep-sided with a gentle break of slope near to its base. It was filled with a clayey-silt containing c.50% of stones. Finds included several pottery sherds of medieval date and a flint flake (residual ?) with evidence of reworking.

Dating of charcoal samples, small finds and pottery will be required during the post-excavation analysis to determine with accuracy the period to which the aforementioned features belong. Initial studies indicate that a proportion of the pottery recovered from these features is from the 13th and 14th centuries.

Evidence of post-medieval occupation of the site was represented by stone-built foundations, several masonry features and a series of cobbled surfaces. Wall foundations 018, 039, and 006 are stratigraphically contemporary with each other, but each appears to belong to a separate structural feature.

### **Wall 018**

A substantial stone-built wall occupied the western edge of the site. Up to three courses of irregularly shaped well faced stones remained, forming a wall 0.70m wide and a maximum of 0.35m standing height. Constructed with a firm lime mortar and no core material, the wall build overlay a course of large stone footings extending beyond the line of the wall by approximately 0.1m. Running approximately parallel to Northgate Street, this wall most likely relates to a structure originally occupying the plot or part of buildings to the rear of number 27 High Street. At its northern extent, modern disturbance in the form of a recent borehole (044) had destroyed any evidence to suggest the continuation of the wall to the north.

An area of collapsed masonry (046), possibly represents the disturbed remains of a wall butting or related to wall 018 which is suggested by the abrupt finish of cobbled surface 033. No in-situ structural evidence of this survived.

At its southern extent, 018 was butted by a further wall 077 (see Fig. 2.). 077 was an earth bonded construction of well faced stone, 0.50m wide and 0.35m in height remaining in up to two courses. On its eastern side, 018 was butted by a small equal sided out-building, 027. To the south of this and also appearing to be constructed against wall 018, was a deep (1.0m) stone-lined sump filled with a series of silt deposits. Finds indicate a Victorian date. Its function, however, was not immediately apparent, although the feature was suggestive of a water based operation.

A large extent of cobble surface covered the area to the west of this feature and wall 018. Sloping pronouncedly to the west it appeared to pre-date walls 077 and 018 which were constructed over the surface, and the stone-lined sump which had cut the cobbles.

### **Walls 039 and 006**

Wall 039, a well constructed foundation of irregularly sized well faced stones firmly bonded with a strong lime mortar, consisted of two remaining courses 0.70m in width lying on an east-west axis in the north east part of the excavated area. Limited by the northern and eastern extents of excavation, the maximum exposed length of the wall was 2.8m. The foundation appeared to have been constructed without a foundation trench on a 0.10m bed of mortar overlying 008 and cut feature 079.



Wall foundations 006 located at the far south east area of the site are of a similar construction to 039. One course of masonry survived in situ. The limited extent of this feature within the excavated area made interpretation difficult. However what is resolvable is a wall running parallel with Northgate Street butted by a construction at right angles running east west. This appeared to be disturbed by the nearby cellarge of former 29 High Street.

## 5. Conclusions

The excavation revealed an interesting range of activity within a relatively small area.

The main result of the excavations so far is the identification of what appears to be a light wattle and daub earth founded structure represented by the shallow cuts 111 and 113, and the burnt daub and charcoal deposits. These remains had been cut by the nearby cellar leaving a minimum of evidence to ascertain its form or size. However, from preliminary consideration of the finds, it would appear that this building was destroyed by fire sometime in the middle ages.

Further medieval activity was represented by the series of pits ( described above 3.1 ) cut into the 'buried soil' deposit, 008.

The sequence of mixed truncated deposits overlying this horizon represents a succession of destruction and levelling layers which has accumulated during various phases of construction and demolition on the site to the present day. The exact nature of this sequence, it is hoped, will become more apparent following the detailed post-excavation analysis of the site record.

The walls, foundations and cobble surfaces described in section 3.2 are all associated with the post-medieval period representing relatively recent development of the site. Preliminary comparison with map evidence available suggests them to be compatible with structures fronting Northgate Street shown on Fred Jackson's survey of property belonging to the Vaynol Estate in the 1870's.

The presence of probable 13th and 14th century pottery in reasonable assemblages compared with the relative lack of later medieval finds will present an interesting study in establishing the sequence of use and disuse of this plot from the 13th century to the development of the site in the 18th century.

## 6. Acknowledgements

Gwynedd Archaeological Trust gratefully acknowledges the co-operation of Cwmni Tref Caernarfon and consulting engineers, Parkmans. GAT would also like to acknowledge the assistance of Eleri Carrog for allowing spoil to be temporarily sited on the adjacent plot.

