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CAERNARFON BANK QUAY WATCHING BRIEF
SEPTEMBER 1994 (G1239) MARCH 1996 (G1398)

REPORT NO. 205

Gwynedd Archaeological Trust
Ymddiriedolaeth Archaeologol Gwynedd

CAERNARFON BANK QUAY WATCHING BRIEF

for Arfon District Council

by G. H. Smith

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SEPTEMBER 1994, G1239, AND MARCH 1996, G1398

Prepared for Arfon District Council

1. INTRODUCTION AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The work was proposed after it became apparent that a new foul water pipe being constructed by Posford Duvivier for Arfon District Council at the south side of Victoria Dock would cross the line of the medieval quay wall known from maps of 1610 and c. 1776. At that time the Afon Cadnant flowed out into a tidal inlet and ships were able to moor and load close to the great East Gate of the town. In the main though the wall must have served to protect the sea frontage of the town from erosion. The wall had been lost to view when a massive stone pier, Victoria Pier, was built in about 1830 (Lloyd, 1989, 10) and the Cadnant estuary largely infilled and the stream culverted (fig. 10, below). This pier was subsequently replaced by the present Victoria Dock which was commenced about 1868 and recorded on the earliest Ordnance Survey map of the town (Ordnance Survey, 1890). A small part of the medieval quay wall was seen for the first time in 1961 when demolition of properties on the north side of Eastgate Street allowed part of the medieval stone bridge across the Cadnant, which had long been hidden underground, to be cleared and exposed (Johns, 1962, 9). The quay wall was next seen in 1994 during construction of a storm water outfall by Travers Morgan for Arfon District Council between the sailing club and the town wall. The wall identified in 1994 was of sophisticated construction of large, cut and faced, limestone blocks laid in horizontal courses, very similar to the stonework seen in the adjoining north-west ('Bell') tower (Penmon stone was used in the construction) and matching the description of the masonry of the quay wall exposed in 1961.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The previous documentary evidence combined with the results of the watching brief in 1994 suggested that the 1996 trench would cross the estimated line of the buried quay wall approximately at right angles. This might allow recording of the wall's exact line and of a cross section of the wall and its facing. The observations made in 1994 in this area are set out here as they are closely relevant to the 1996 observations. The main 1994 work focussed on the Caernarfon town streets (G1257, GAT Report Nos. 164 & 174)

3. METHODOLOGY

The machine excavation of the trench was observed by brief daily visits over two weeks from the 22nd of February to the 8th of March and a whole day on the 11th March when the quay wall itself was reached. With the helpful cooperation of Elwyn Owen and Victor Pritchard of Posford Duvivier, it was possible carry out the recording without hindering the construction work. The exposed wall was cleaned, photographed, one section face of the trench drawn and the position of the wall recorded on plan.

4. RESULTS

A. Description of work in September 1994

During excavation of a storm water outfall between the sailing club and the north-west town wall a length of massive wall was exposed at the south side of the trench lying approximately parallel to the town wall (fig. 1). The wall was faced with cut limestone blocks laid in

horizontal courses of varying depth. The wall had a core of angular, irregular limestone blocks and fragments set in a mass of lime mortar (fig. 2, 11). The top of the wall was irregular, damaged and truncated at about 0.5 m below surface level (fig. 3). The face of the wall was vertical and continued downwards beyond the base of the trench at 11.75 m below surface level. At the west end the wall was truncated, with the facing removed during excavation of an existing foul water outfall. At the east end the wall turned at an angle to run to the north-east and at this point there was a feature in the wall face - a culvert opening at 1.67 m below surface level (fig. 4). The culvert opening was rectangular with a protective lip of granite and was blocked with silt and oyster shells.

b. Description of work in February to March 1996

The trench being excavated was approximately 2.5 m deep at the west end, deepening to over 3 m at the east end where it connected with a foul water pumping station outside the entrance to Church Street.

a. At the west end, the lowest level of the trench cut into clean, red, silty sand with scattered slate fragments. This seems to represent an in situ remnant of the natural marine spit which existed at the time of construction of Victoria Dock.

b. The rest of the trench until a point where it approached the pumping station at the east end cut only through relatively loose backfill layers of mid 19th century date which included a wide variety of materials. All this material was ground made up for Victoria Dock.

c. At the east end, the trench encountered a massive wall, approximately 2.5 m wide and of a height greater than the 3 m exposed to the base of the trench (fig. 5). The wall was constructed of angular, irregular blocks and fragments of limestone of various sizes plus rounded cobbles set in a mass of very strong lime mortar. There was no sign of any ashlar facing, nor could any facing of any type be seen. The top of the wall was irregular, truncated and reduced somewhat, probably during construction of Victoria Dock, with material tipped over it to fill the ground to the west. The rear of the wall was intact but most of the layers associated with it had been removed during construction of the adjoining pumping station. Some large shingle which lay immediately east of the wall appeared to be the only possible surviving material which might relate to the construction of the wall, being backfill behind the quay wall. There were no finds of pottery etc which might be contemporary with the wall's use or construction.

5. DISCUSSION

The wall found in 1994 and 1996 clearly matches the line of the quay wall which existed prior to the construction of Victoria Pier in *c.* 1830 and shown on the earliest town plan of 1610, by Speed (fig. 6) and on an estate map of *c.* 1777 (fig. 7) (Vaynol 1777). The composition of the structure observed in 1996 is closely similar to the core of the wall observed in 1994 but without its facing. The wall probably did originally have a close-fitting facing as such can be expected on an exposed sea-wall. It seems likely that the facing stones had been robbed from this part of the wall possibly because being at some distance from the town wall here it would not be likely to affect their stability.

The offset and widening of the quay wall outside Church Street was a necessary part of the original design in order to effect a junction with the town ditch. Thus, the wider quay wall met with the counter scarp bank of the town ditch and outside Eastgate joined up with the medieval stone bridge which crossed the Cadnant estuary. Here part of the quay wall was exposed in 1961 (Johns, 1962, 9). the wall was truncated at its upper level and was not exposed to its full depth. It was constructed of limestone blocks 'like those in the W. link wall in the N. ditch of the castle' (RCAHM, 1968, 121, A1105 (i)), and believed to have joined up with the stone abutment for, and at the same height as the Cadnant bridge. It was actually the counterscarp bank of the town ditch which formed the 'bank quay' and along the line of which

the present road of that name runs. This provided a well-used, sheltered wharf for the town up to the construction of Victoria Dock, as shown by early prints (eg fig. 8, by John Boydell, 1750). Where the town ditch met the quay wall some kind of culvert for drainage can be expected. That recorded in 1994 seems rather too small and some other culvert may still survive nearby at a lower level. The 1994 culvert can, perhaps, be best interpreted as a minor drain from the town itself, rather than the ditch.

The nature of construction of the ashlar-faced wall seen in 1994 matches exactly that of the nearby north-west tower, but not that of the town wall at this point which is of mixed rock types in random stonework. The town walls were constructed at about the same time as the castle and work began about 1283 starting with the ditch, with the masonry complete by about 1285 (RCAHM, 1960, 150). The quay was first built on the west side in earth and timber, in 1297-1301 and rebuilt in stone from 1316 (ibid, 150). In later years, in 1538-9, when the state of the quay was endangering the town's foundations, it was repaired using materials from Aberconwy Abbey and Bangor Friary (ibid, 151).

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The line of the quay wall where it lies in the area of the present street called Bank Quay can be plotted from the early maps. Unfortunately the 18th century estate map is largely schematic. Speed's three dimensional town view seems, surprisingly, to be more of a true, surveyed map. When measured and plotted (fig. 9) from this map the estimated face of the quay wall lies neatly, and appropriately, on the line of the property boundary at the north side of Bank Quay (Evan Jones builders' yard), that is, where new land (and property) was created by reclamation for construction of the Victoria Pier in c. 1830 (fig. 10). It will be valuable to try to locate it by watching brief during any future intrusions in this area. The sheltered inlet and town-quay wall were well used by shipping and so may produce significant evidence. The line of the quay is also closely associated with the surviving remnant of the medieval stone bridge across the Cadnant, which is itself an historically and architecturally valuable monument, even though largely hidden from view at present.

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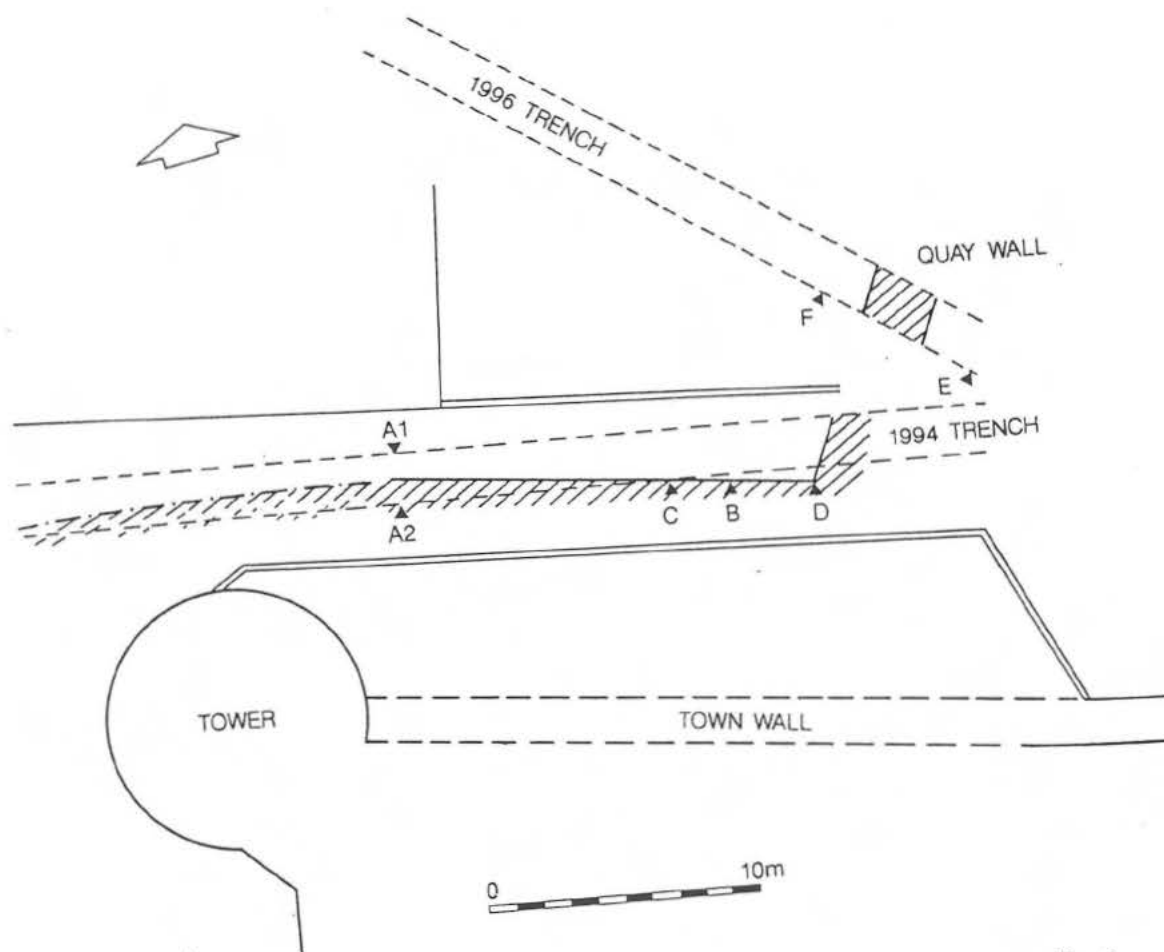
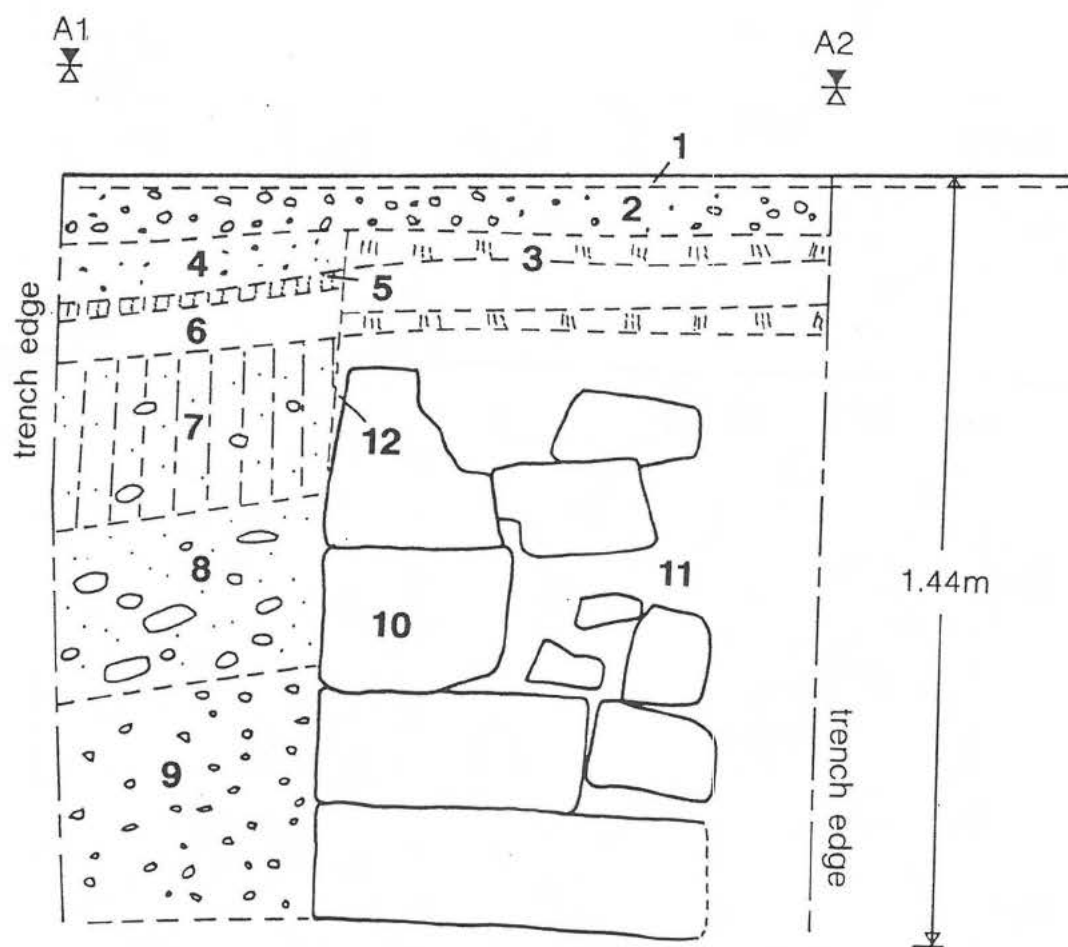


fig 1



NOT TO SCALE

fig 2

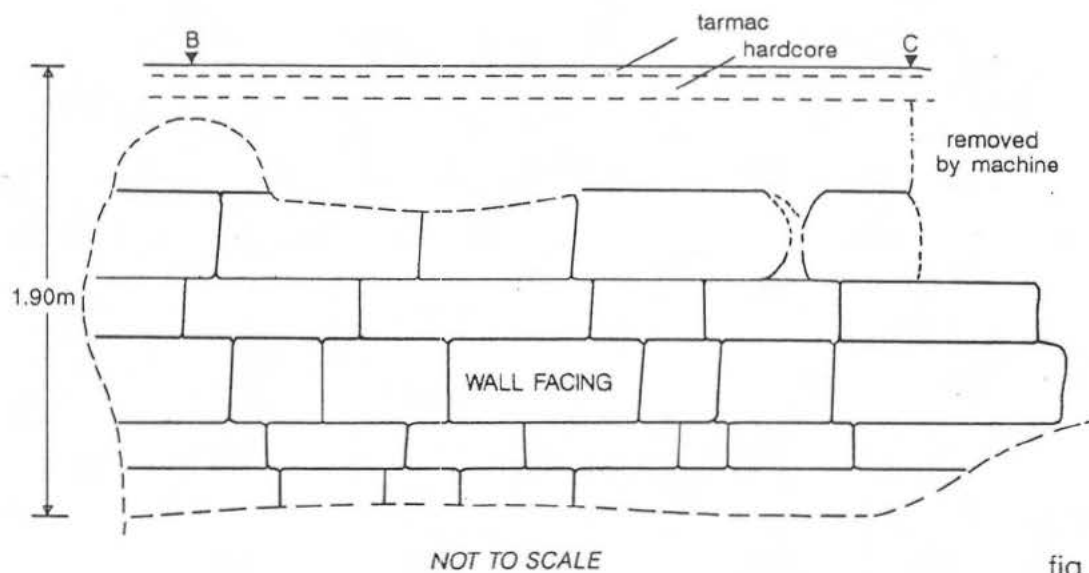


fig 3

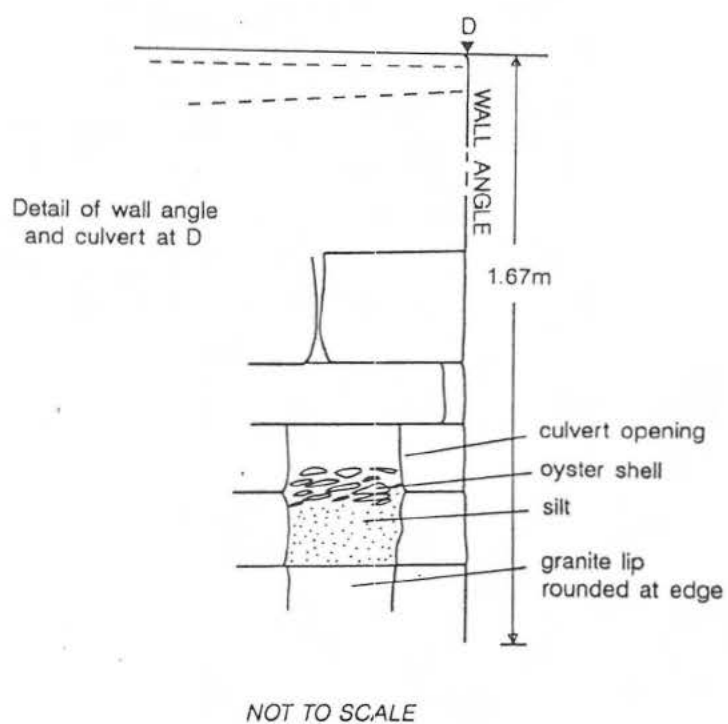


fig 4

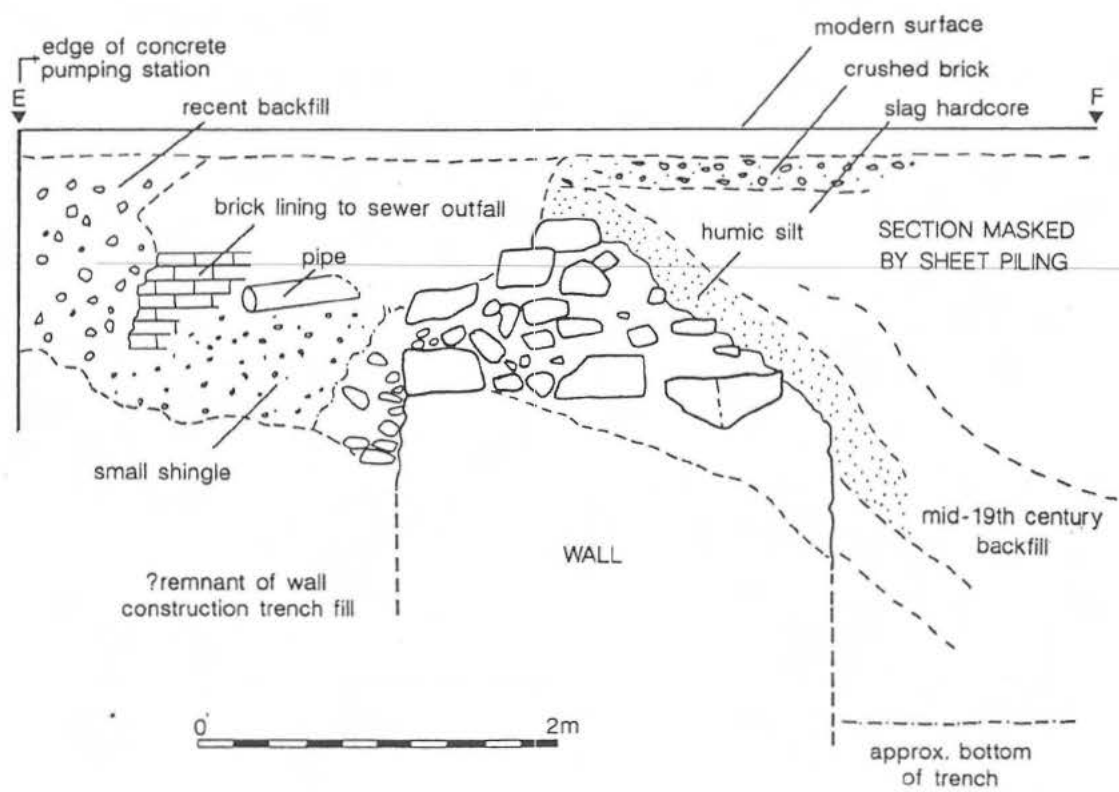


fig 5

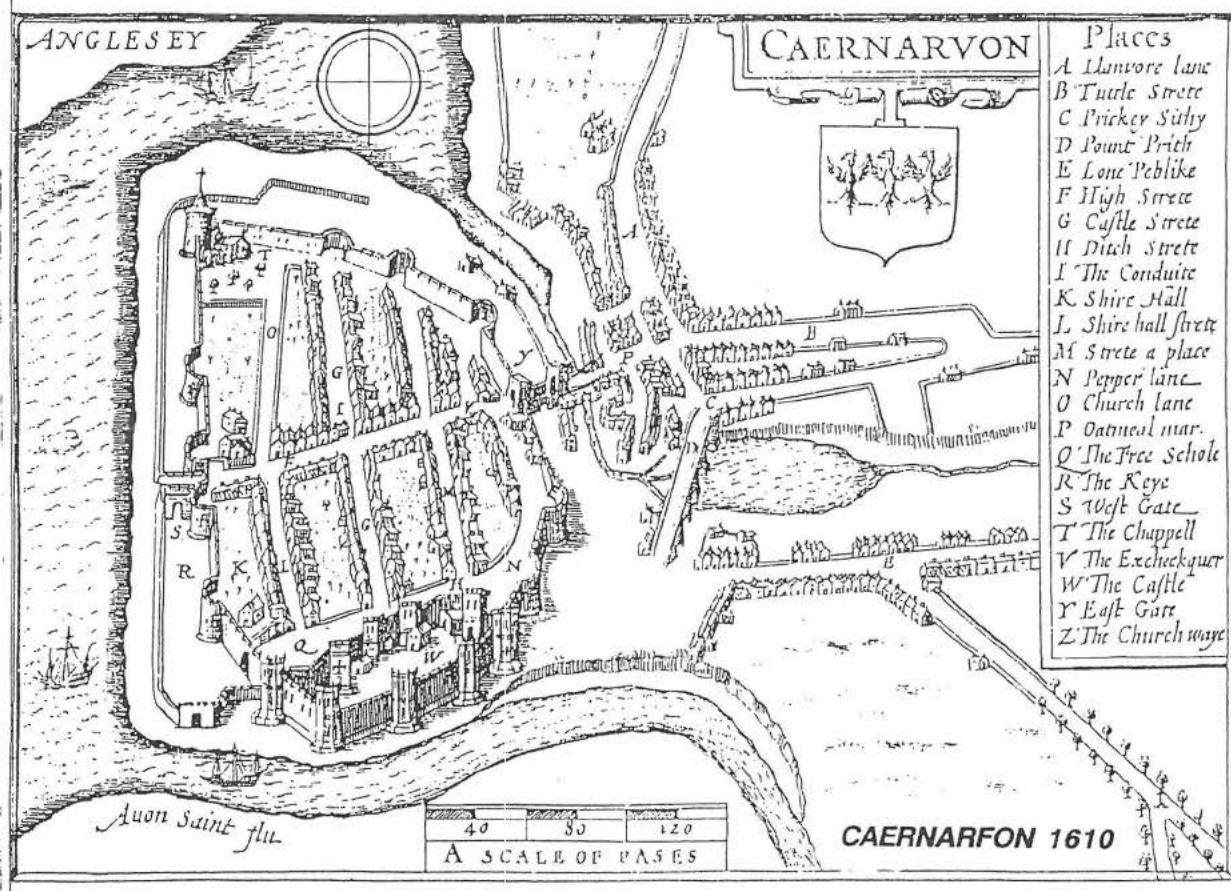


fig 6

CAERNARFON 1771

The Town of
CAERNARFON

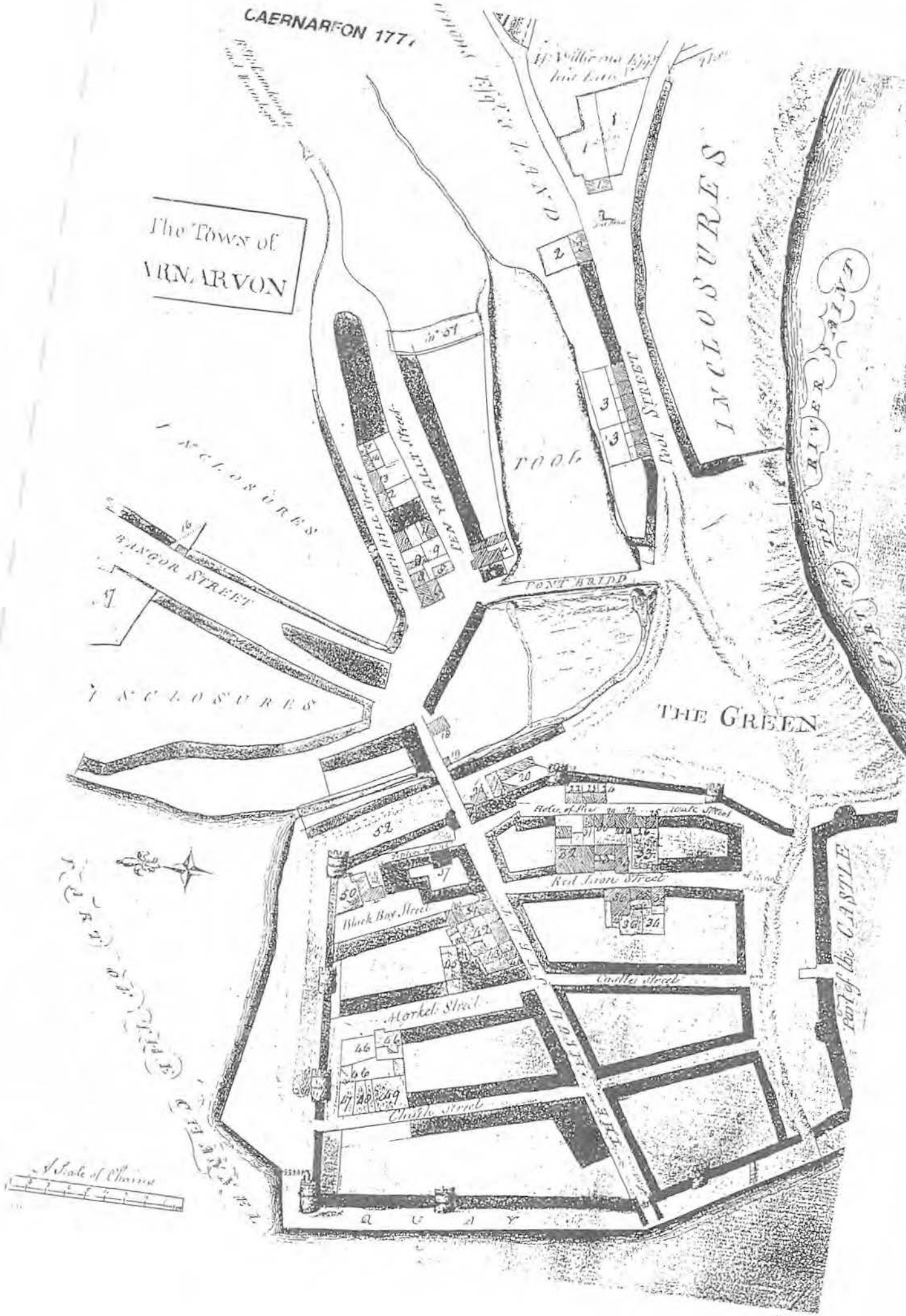
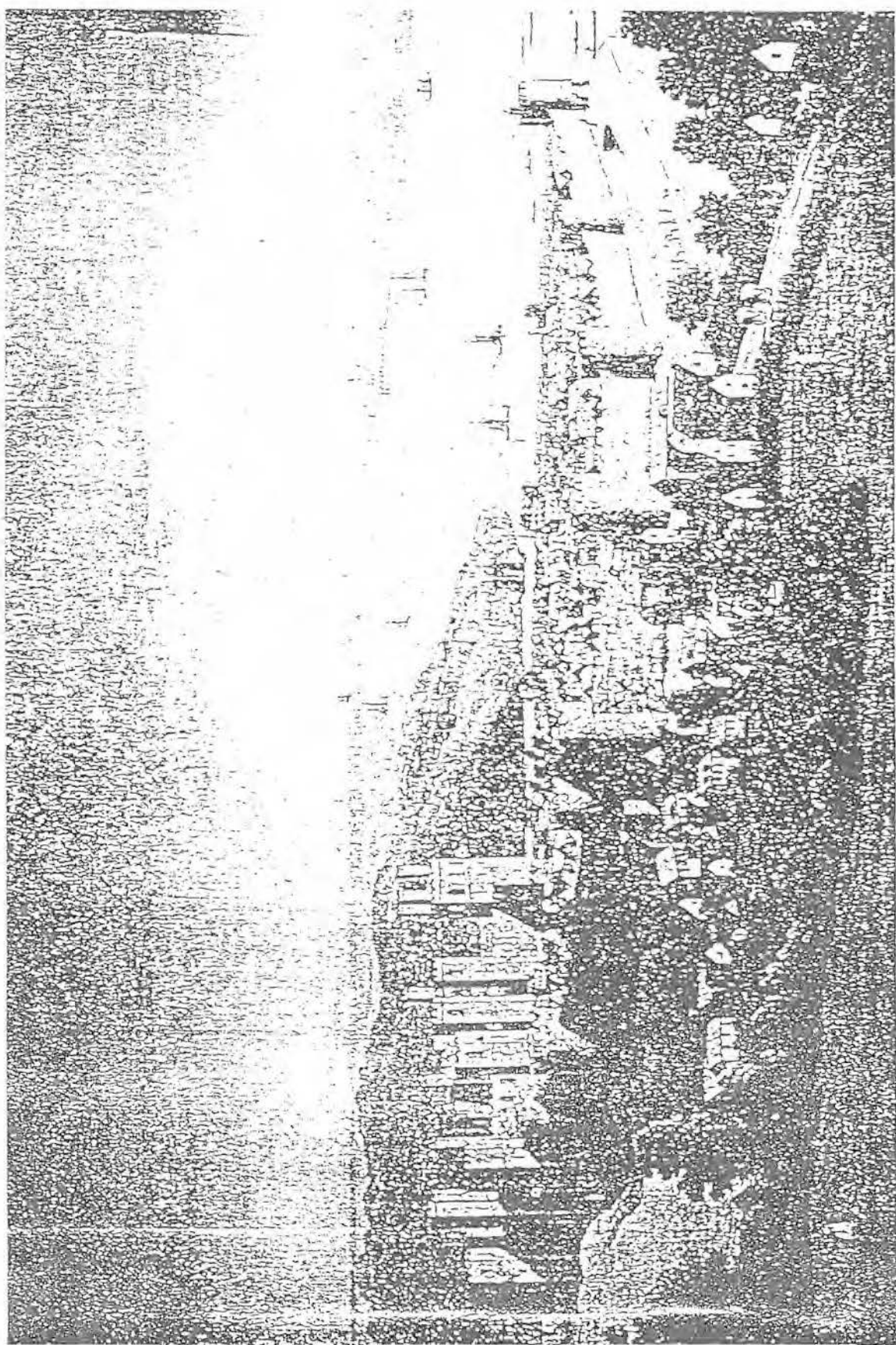


fig 7



'Prospect of Caernarfon; taken on the east side'



fig 10

