

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE MEDIEVAL TOWNS OF SOUTHWEST WALES

ABERGWILI



1993 aerial photograph of Abergwili (DAT AP93-112.18)

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ABERGWILI

By

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ABERGWILI

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Thomas Bek, Bishop of St Davids, founded a college and town at Abergwili in the late thirteenth century. The town was granted a weekly market and annual fair, but was small, with just 25 burgages recorded in 1326. These were laid out on either side of the High Street. St Davids Church lay on a lane to the south of the town and the college to the east end of the town. No archaeological work has been undertaken in the core of the medieval town. Small-scale work close to the church revealed little of archaeological interest.

KEY FACTS

Status: 1290 weekly market; 1313 annual fair.

Size: 1326 25 burgages.

Archaeology: no significant archaeological interventions.

LOCATION

Abergwili lies in Carmarthenshire (Fig. 1) at the confluence of the rivers Towy and Gwili a few metres above the flood plain (SN 439 210). High tides on both rivers extend just upstream of Abergwili. Carmarthen lies 2.5 km to the east. The Towy valley provides excellent route corridors to the west and east, and the Gwili valley gives access to north Carmarthenshire and beyond.

HISTORY

There is some evidence for a pre-Anglo-Norman church at Abergwili, but it is not until the 1280s that Abergwili enters history when Thomas Bek, Bishop of St Davids, founded a college. It is highly likely that he founded a small town at the same time to the west of the college, although no charter is known. In 1290 Abergwili was granted a weekly Friday market and in 1313 an annual fair. The town remained small; only 25 burgages were recorded in 1326. The later medieval history of the borough has not been researched.

St David's Church, originally dedicated to St Maurice, was rebuilt in the 1840s immediately to the north of its medieval predecessor.

In 1541 the college was removed to Brecon and later in the sixteenth century the buildings were converted into a bishop's palace. They remained as such until the 1970s when Carmarthenshire County Council acquired them for a museum. The diocese built a new bishop's palace in the grounds of the old palace.

MORPHOLOGY

Until the twentieth century Abergwili consisted of one street, High Street (up until the late twentieth century this was the A40 trunk road), with the Bishop's Palace at the east end and the parish church of St David's on a side lane to the south (Figs. 2-4). Long narrow properties shown on the 1840 parish tithe map and late nineteenth century Ordnance Survey maps on either side of High Street are remnants of burgages laid out in the late thirteenth/early fourteenth centuries. The 25 burgages recorded in 1326 could easily be accommodated in this area (Fig. 6).

The Central Wales and Carmarthen Junction Railway was constructed to the north of Abergwili in the late nineteenth century and since the Second World War new houses have been built in and to the north and south of the historic core. The A40 now bypasses Abergwili, running along the line of the former railway.

BUILDINGS AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES AND MONUMENTS

Scheduled Monuments

There are no scheduled monuments in Abergwili.

Listed Buildings

There are four listed buildings in Abergwili: the Old Bishop's Palace (County Museum), a lodge to the Bishop's Palace, the walled garden of the Bishop's Palace and St David's Church (Fig. 4). All grade II.

Conservation Area

Abergwili is not in a conservation area.

Registered Parks and Gardens

The Bishop's Palace is a registered park and garden (Fig. 4)

Registered Historic Landscape

Abergwili lies in the Tywi Valley Registered Historic Landscape in the Abergwili historic landscape character area.

Undesignated Historic Environment Assets

There are approximately 20 sites and monuments on the Regional Historic Environment Record. Four of these are duplicate records of listed buildings (Fig. 4). Others are almost exclusively of nineteenth century houses, religious buildings and street furniture.

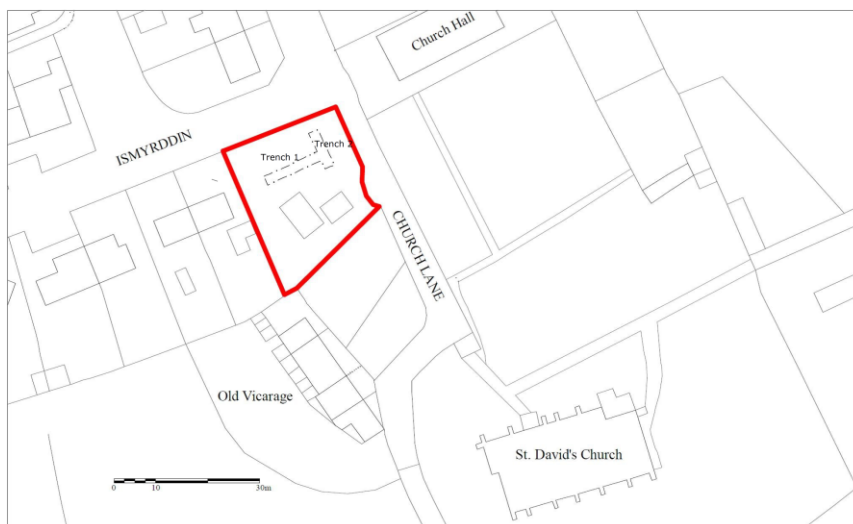
ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS

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. 5).

Several small archaeological investigations have taken place in the Bishop's Palace grounds, including geophysical surveys and an excavation in the walled garden. These lie outside Abergwili historic settlement and so are not included here.

1. The only significant discovery made during an archaeological evaluation on land adjoining the old vicarage, Church Lane, was a ditch below topsoil and overburden. No dating evidence was obtained from the ditch. Reference: Enright 2015 (108558).



Location of the Church Lane evaluation.



Section of the ditch excavated in the Church Lane evaluation.

2. Nothing of archaeological interest was noted during a watching brief carried out during construction of an extension to the rear of the Old Vicarage. Foundation trenches cut straight into natural river gravels. Reference: Ludlow 2005 (55209).
3. A watching brief was carried out during excavations for a new electricity cable on the west side of St David's Church. No significant archaeological remains were recorded. Reference: Ludlow 2003 (48183).

ARCHAEOLOGICAL POTENTIAL

Abergwili has limited potential for addressing some of the key research agenda items for the medieval period, including town plantation and church building.

Only very small archaeological interventions have taken place in the town. These were not in the core of the historic settlement and returned little in the way of significant archaeology. Opportunities for investigating possible surviving archaeology are limited as the street frontage of the core of Abergwili presents an unbroken façade of domestic and commercial buildings, with little in way of undeveloped space.

REFERENCES

Published and unpublished

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- Ludlow N 2003. Saint David's Church, Abergwili, Carmarthenshire: a watching brief, Cambria Archaeology (Dyfed Archaeological Trust) unpublished report.
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- Soulsby I 1983. *The Towns of Medieval Wales*, (Chichester: Phillimore).

Databases and online references

Dyfed Historic Environment Record <https://www.archwilio.org.uk/arch/>

Cof Cymru <https://cadw.gov.wales/advice-support/cof-cymru>

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>

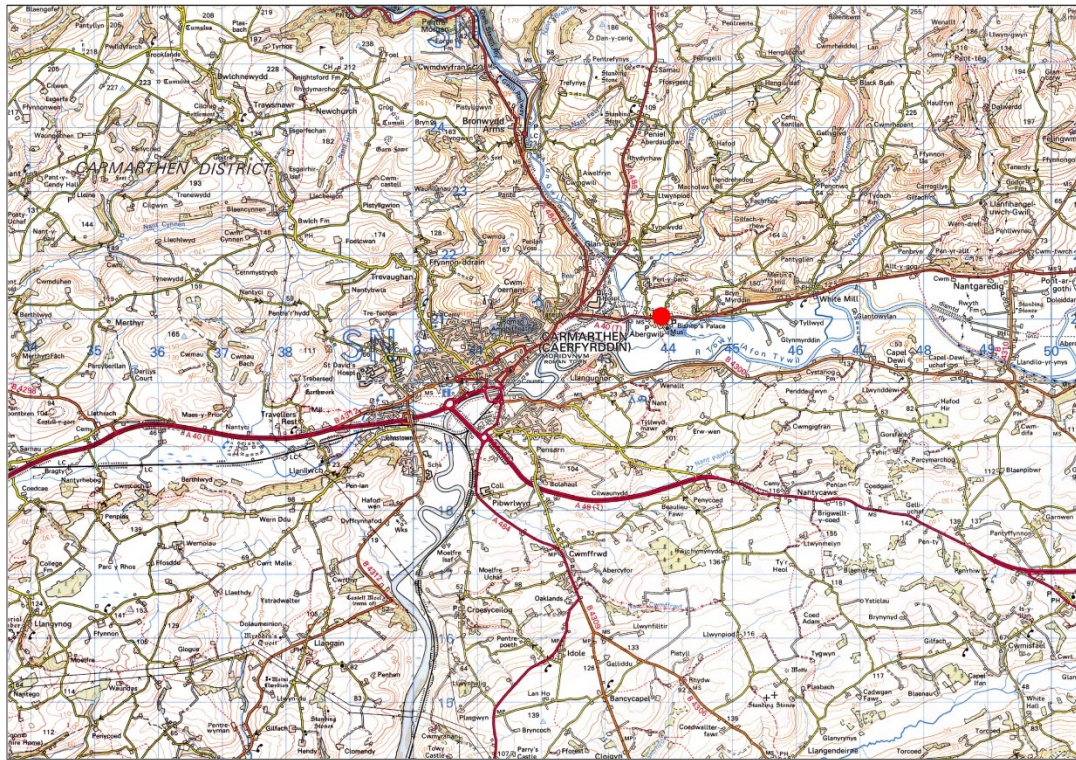


Figure 1. Location map.

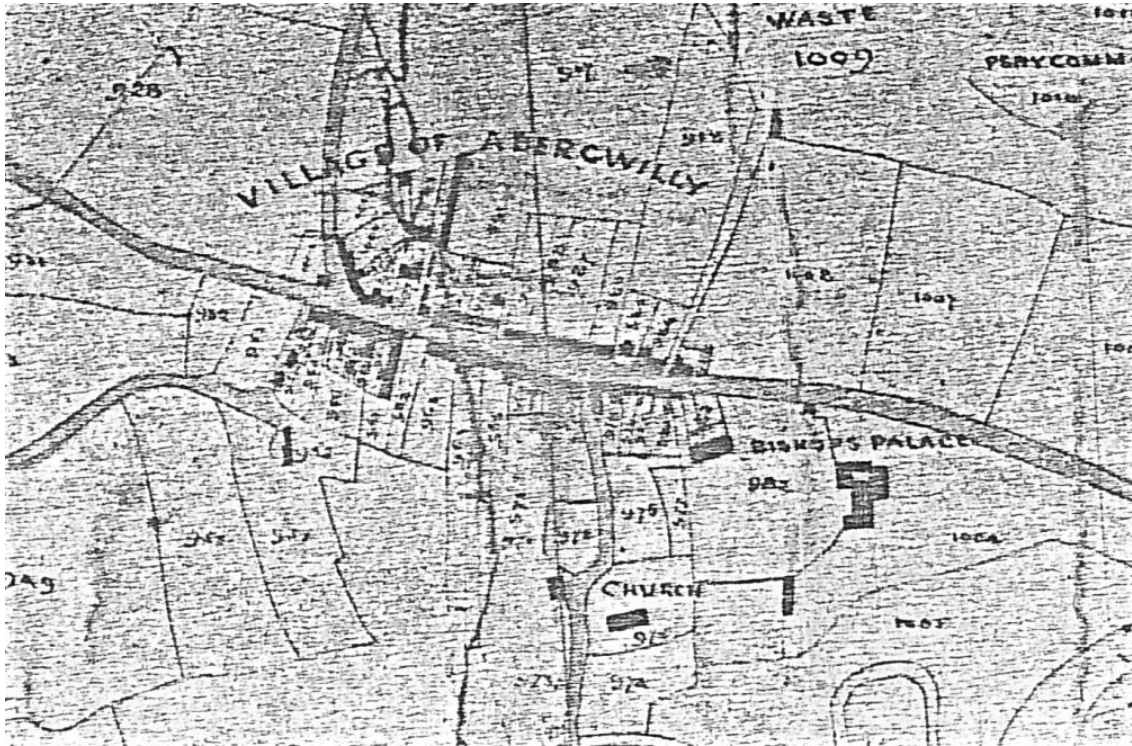


Figure 2. Extract from the 1840 Abergwilly parish tithe map.

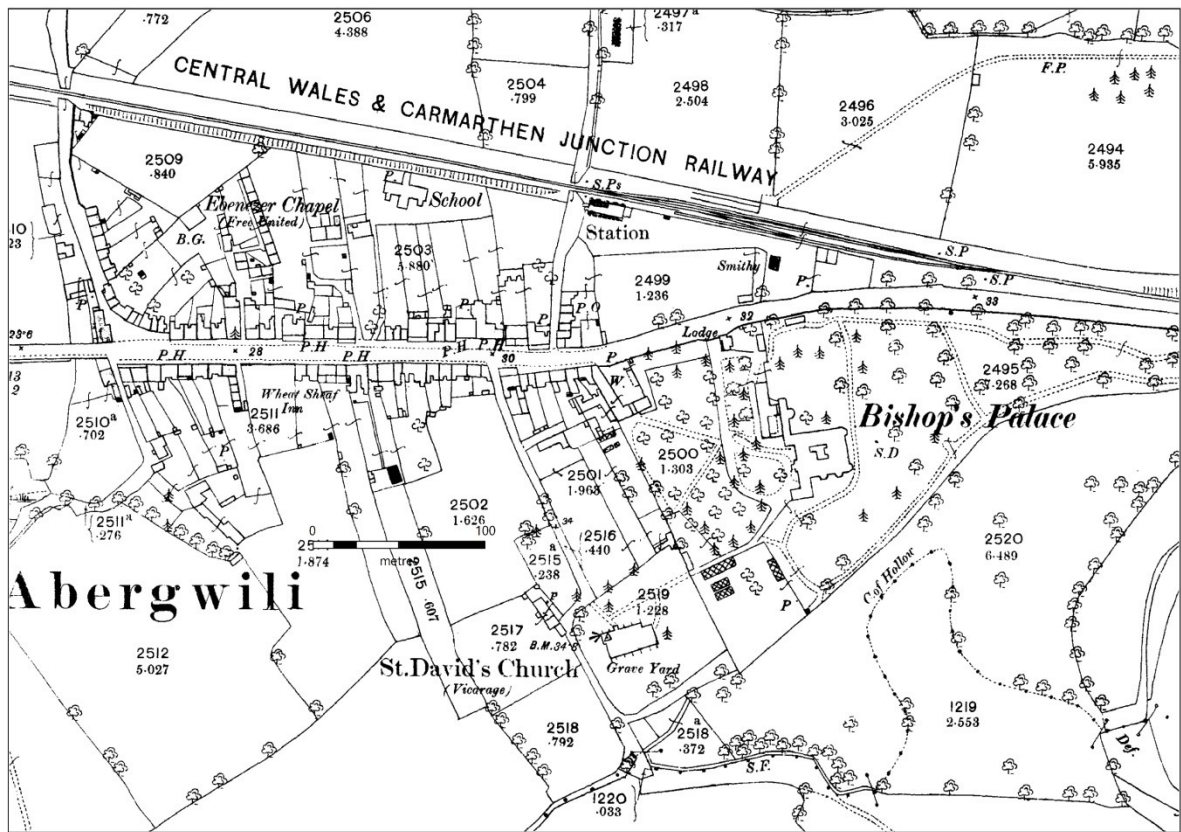


Figure 3. Extract from the 1889 Ordnance Survey 1:2500 map (Carmarthenshire 39.04)



Figure 4. Listed buildings (blue circles), the Registered Historic Park and Garden outlined in green and Her sites (red circles)..

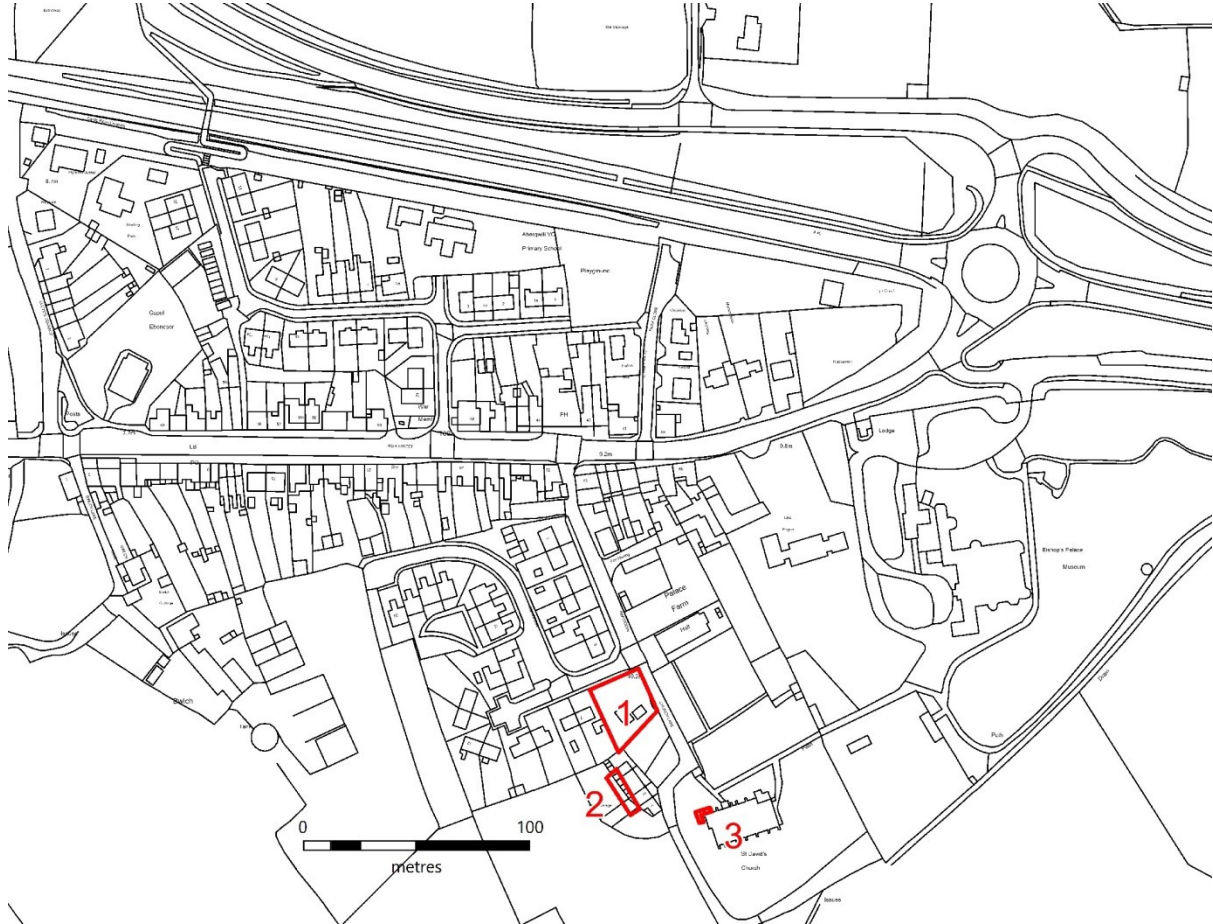


Figure 5. Location of archaeological interventions.



Figure 6. Map showing Abergwili as it may have been at its maximum extent in the medieval period c.1320.