THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE MEDIEVAL TOWNS OF SOUTHWEST WALES

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By

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Following the Anglo-Norman conquest of southwest Wales Henry I installed the Bishop of Salisbury as lord of Kidwelly. He founded Kidwelly castle and a defended town on the north side of the Gwendraeth Fach river and priory on the south side during the first two decades of the twelfth century. The town rapidly expanded and by the fourteenth century had spread along several streets outside the town defences. Within the defences burgage plots became vacant and have been since the medieval period. The priory, on the south side of the river, provided a secondary focus and here a settlement developed from at least the fourteenth century. Archaeological investigations within the defended town have revealed the presence of medieval and later stratified deposits.

KEY FACTS

Status: 1107-14 town charter.

Size: Uncertain. 136 burgages in early sixteenth century.

Archaeology: Stratified medieval deposits survive in the old town.

LOCATION

Kidwelly lies on the Gwendraeth Fach over one kilometre from where it flows into Carmarthen Bay (SN 408 070). The river is tidal to just upstream of Kidwelly, but it is now silted up and is not navigable (Figs. 1, 2 and 3). Kidwelly Castle and the 'old' town lie in a slightly elevated position on the north bank of the river. St Mary's Church and the 'new' town lie on lower lying ground to the south of the river.

HISTORY

Following the Anglo-Norman conquest of South Wales Henry I installed Roger, Bishop of Salisbury, as lord of Kidwelly in 1106. He started building the castle soon after this date. English, French (Norman) and Flemish settlers would have been housed close to the castle. Between 1107 and 1114 a charter was granted to the town and Kidwelly Priory was established. Thus three elements of Anglo-Norman colonisation – castle, town, and monastery – were in place by the early twelfth century. The town occupied a defended area to the south of the castle with the priory on the south side of the River Gwendraeth Fach. The castle remained in Anglo-Norman (English) hands for much of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries apart from short periods when it was captured by Welsh rulers. The growth of the town was disrupted by attacks in 1215 and in 1231; in the war of 1258 the town was destroyed. By the late thirteenth century Kidwelly was in the hands of the Chaworth family and it is they who constructed much of the stone castle that survives to this day. Later additions include the fine gatehouse. The castle continued to be used and

minor repairs are recorded throughout the sixteenth century, but in 1609 it is recorded as 'greatly decayed and ruynated'.

In 1280 the townspeople were granted a licence to enclose the town with walls, probably replacing existing earth and timber defences. The walls and gates had been built before 1332. By the fourteenth century the old town of Kidwelly had spread outside the narrow confines of the walled area, along what are now known as Ferry Road, Water Street and Bridge Street. This seems to have been at the expense of the settlement within the walls as deserted burgages were recorded in 1401.

Outside the old town a small settlement of tenants of the prior developed around the priory. These did not attain the privileges of self-government enjoyed by the burgesses of the old town, and the settlement was not defended by a rampart or wall. During the fourteenth century the priory church was rebuilt as the parish church of St Mary.

The castle and town came under sustained attack during the Glyn Dŵr rising of 1403-04 during which ita was destroyed. The defences of the castle and town were strengthened following the rising, but the 'old' town did not recover from the attack. The 1444 town charter describes the old town as 'now in manner waste and desolate for want of Burgesses there dwelling' and in the 1530s John Leland noted that the old town 'is nere all desolated'.

An early sixteenth century survey records about 136 burgages, mostly along Ferry Road, Water Street and Bridge Street, with just three burgages, seven tenements and eight cottages within the town walls. South of the bridge eight burgages lay on 'Le Cawsey' and three on St Mary's Street. Twenty-eight other dwellings were recorded on St Mary's Street.

The shift of the focus of the town first to the streets outside the walls of the old town and later to the new town south of the river is confirmed in a deed of 1574 when the existence of civic hall at its present location is mentioned.

There seems to have been little expansion of the town in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with new development accompanying modest industrial development in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

MORPHOLOGY

Kidwelly can be treated as two separate entities; the castle and 'old' town on the north side of the Gwendraeth Fach (Fig. 3) and the parish church and 'new' town on the south side.

The substantial stone-built castle sits within a substantial earthwork enclosure. The northern part of this enclosure is referred to here as the North Bailey and is devoid of

buildings; the walled 'old' town lies in the southern part of the enclosure. The North Bailey is divided into two, separated by a substantial ditch, which documents indicate was dug during the Glyn Dŵr rising of 1403-04. However, there is no evidence that the North Bailey was ever built on - although it may have been planned to accommodate part of the town – and indeed as early as the late thirteenth century and fourteenth century documents refer to gardens and a dovecote which may have occupied these two enclosures. Later, 'Two Conigars' (rabbit warrens) are referred to in this area.

The southern enclosure, by contrast, encompassed the 'old' town and seems to have done so since the foundation of castle in the early twelfth century. The line of the town walls is well attested (Fig. 2). The wall on the southeast side of the town survives; the projected line of the wall on the north side of the town is defined by topography and a length of wall survives on the north edge of the town, terminating on the edge of the castle ditch. A small excavation here in 1980 showed the wall to be sitting on an earthwork bank.

Documents record either two or three gates to the town. The main gatehouse, dating mainly to the fourteenth century, still stands on the southwest side of the town. A second gate would have stood at the end of Castle Road – the north gate. It has been argued that an extant archway (see Fig. 2) was the site of a medieval gate, but this is more likely to be later in date, created when the North Bailey was used as rabbit warrens. The third gate, if it ever existed, is likely to have been close to the castle gatehouse, giving access to the mill and river.

As noted above, the town within the walls seems to have been largely deserted from at least the fifteenth century. It is possible that originally the parish church stood in the 'old' town and that the designation of St Mary's Church on the south side of the river as the parish church in the fourteenth century reflected the shifting focus of the town. Today the old town contains a series of dispersed buildings dating to the nineteenth century and later, with perhaps earlier elements in some of the structures. There is a lot of open space and no clear pattern of surviving medieval burgages.

It is clear from documentary evidence that in the medieval period the town expanded outside the defences surrounding the 'old' town. Burgages in the form of long, narrow properties are still evident on maps and on the ground on Water Street, Ferry Road, New Street and Bridge Street, perhaps laid out as early as the thirteenth century. Particularly good examples survive on the south side of Water Street. The street frontages present an almost unbroken façade of terraced houses of nineteenth and later date, with one or two building perhaps of eighteenth century date.

What are almost certainly burgages are also preserved in the modern townscape to the south of the river, along Bridge Street, Causeway Street, Pinged Hill and Lady Street, focused on the junction of Lady Street and Causeway/Bridge Street adjacent to the St Mary's Church and the town hall. Street frontages are of almost unbroken terraces, with domestic and commercial properties interspersed. Buildings are nineteenth century or later.

St Mary's Parish Church/St Mary's Priory lies at the heart of the 'new' town. The extant church is a substantial building of cruciform plan, comprising a chancel, nave, vestry, north and south transepts and tower. The church was originally part of the priory. Apart from the church, nothing of the Benedictine priory survives above ground. The location of the claustral and other building associated with the priory is uncertain; the Ordnance Survey 1:2500 1st Edition map labels 'Priory (remains of)' to the north north-east of the church, it has been suggested that the priory lay to the east end of the current church, whilst to the west a building known as 'Prior's House' stood to the west of the church.

Castle Mill is an early nineteenth century building, but is assumed to be located on and earlier mill site, perhaps originally medieval.

Figures 8 and 9 are conjectural plans of Kidwelly as it may have been in c.1150 and c.1320.

BUILDINGS AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES AND MONUMENTS

Scheduled Monuments

There are three scheduled monuments in Kidwelly Fig. 4):

Kidwelly Castle and the bailey to the north (CM002).

The town gate and defences (CM183).

Part of the medieval 'old' town (CM209).

Listed Buildings

There are 15 listed buildings in Kidwelly (Fig. 5). These include the castle and town gate, which are also scheduled monuments. Others include civic buildings, religious buildings and commercial builds which apart from the parish church and Kidwelly Bridge date to the eighteenth/nineteenth century. The paucity of listed domestic structures is a reflection of nineteenth century rebuilding of the town.

Conservation Area

Kidwelly conservation area includes the older built up areas as well as open land around the river (Figs 4-6).

Registered Parks and Gardens

There are no Registered Parks and Gardens.

Registered Historic Landscape

Kidwelly lies in the Tâf and Towy Estuary Registered Historic Landscape. It has been characterised in the Kidwelly character area.

Undesignated Historic Environment Assets

There are approximately 50 sites and monuments on the Regional Historic Environment Record (Fig. 6). Some of these duplicate the listed building and scheduled monument records. Others are mainly of post-medieval sites, including undesignated houses and other elements of the built environment.

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. Apart from the excavations and surveys in the castle, archaeological investigations in the town have been small-scale. Individually they do not provide great insight, but collectively they begin to provide a picture of the archaeology of the town and by extension of the people who lived there. All interventions have been in and around the castle or in the 'old' town, apart from one (8 below) in St Mary's Churchyard – this is not shown on Figure 7.

Numbers in parentheses below refer to records in the Dyfed Historic Environment Record.

1. There have been several investigations in and around the castle. Much of the chronology of the castle is based on Fox's and Radford's excavations in the early 1930s. Recent authorities have suggested modifications to their chronology. Watching briefs during floodlight installation and on repair work following a land slip added little to our overall knowledge of the castle. Priestley and Turner's analyses provides a chronology and function of the great gatehouse. References: Fox and Radford 1930, Priestley and Turner 2017, Reames 2013, Cambria Archaeology Field Operations 2000 (HER 41473, 106655).

2. A single trench evaluation was undertaken to inform plans to extend a cottage called The Tythe Barn within Kidwelly 'old' town close to the castle within a scheduled area. A significant number of archaeological features were recorded including a stone-built hearth, probably post-medieval, overlying a possible kiln or oven. A pit of probable medieval date was also noted. The recorded archaeology lay *c*.0.5m below the present ground surface. Reference: Shobbrook 2008 (HER 93843).

Photograph of the evaluation trench at The Tythe Barn showing the stone-built hearth and underlying kiln or oven.

3. Dyfed Archaeological Trust excavated two trenches (Trenches 1 and 2) in advance of plans to extend Kidwelly Castle car park and four (Trenches 3 to 6) in advance of construction of a new footbridge in 1990. The hand-dug trenches in the proposed car park encountered archaeology below *c*. 0.4m of garden soil. Archaeology consisted of a series of intercutting pits, probably a rubbish pit of medieval date, smaller cut features and a 1m thick midden deposit towards the SE end of the site; this was possibly built against the inside of the town wall. All the above date to no later than the fourteenth century. Trench 3 was excavated at the edge of a steep gully – midden deposits similar to those noted above were recorded. Trench 4 encountered the foundations of the Wesleyan Chapel that stood here until its demolition in 1962. Trench 5 (not shown on the plan came down onto modern deposits, as did Trench 6. References: Dyfed Archaeological Trust 1990a and b (HER 14363).
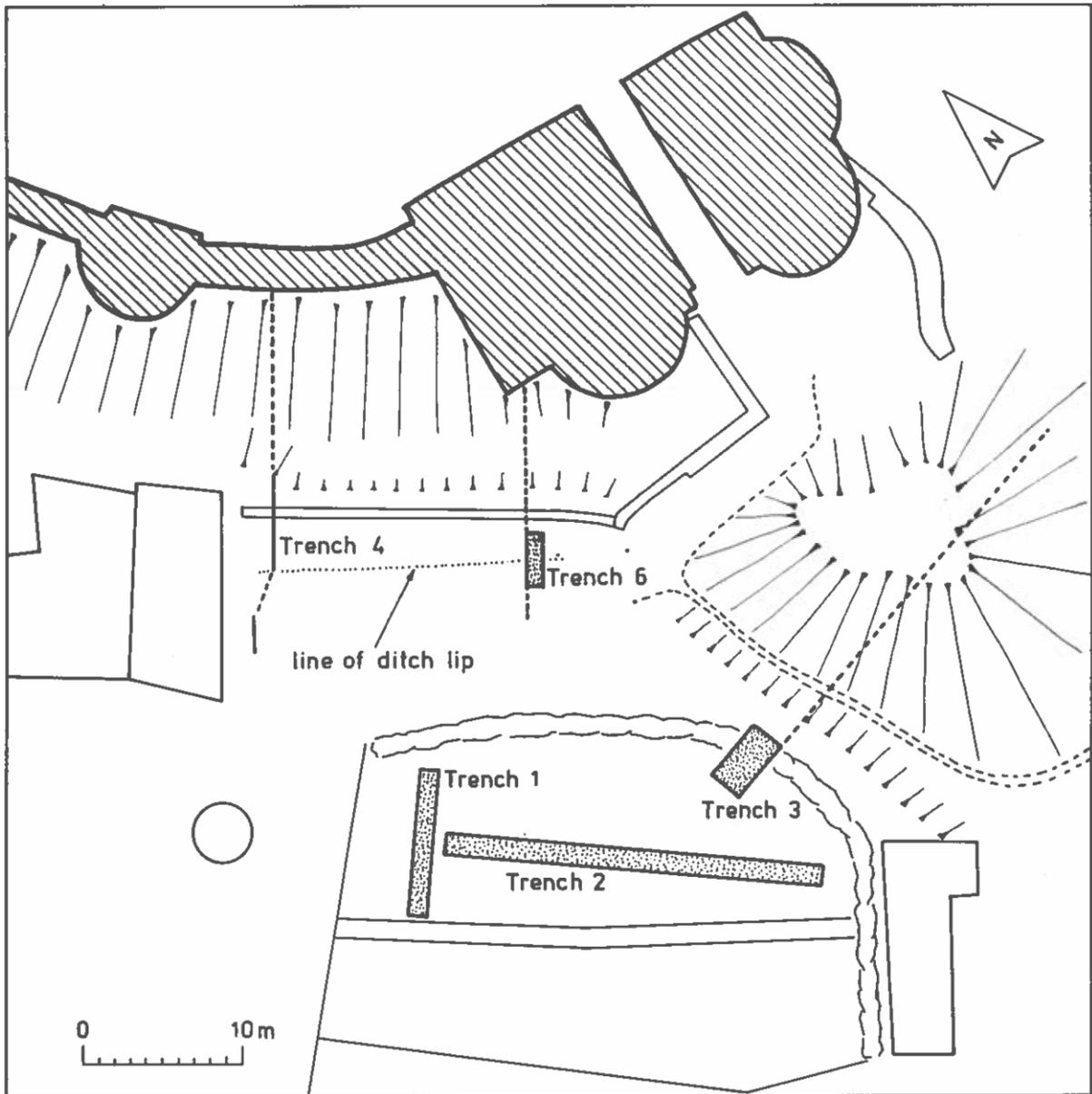
Plan of the trenches dug in advance of the new car park and bridge.

4. Dyfed Archaeological Trust excavated three trenches in 1980 in the former farmyard of Castle Farm in advance of proposals to construct a visitor car park for Kidwelly Castle. One trench on the top edge of the castle ditch revealed post-medieval deposits. A trench cut against the medieval town wall showed that the wall had been built over a levelled-off bank. A third trench along the street frontage immediately to the north of The Tythe Barn revealed stone foundations and cobbled surfaces c.0.7m below the surface former farmyard. These were left *in-situ*. Following the excavation the site was designated a scheduled monument (CM209). A report was not produced but records are stored in the Dyfed Historic Environment Record (HER 91290).

Castle Farm trench 3 excavated against the town wall.

Castle Farm trench 2 showing walls and cobbled surfaces.

5. In 1991 Geophysical Surveys carried out a magnetometer and resistivity survey in the north bailey of Kidwelly Castle. The surveys detected little of archaeological interest apart from a possible hearth/kiln. Reference: Geophysical Surveys 1991.

6. An evaluation excavation consisting of two small trenches was carried out in advance of plans to construct a two-storey extension to 15 Castle Street. Both trenches provided positive results; rubbish pits of possible medieval date were recorded at a depth of 0.7m. A watching brief maintained during construction revealed further evidence of medieval occupation, but no structural remains were noted. References: Meek 2009, Ratty 2014 (HER 97675 and 106466).
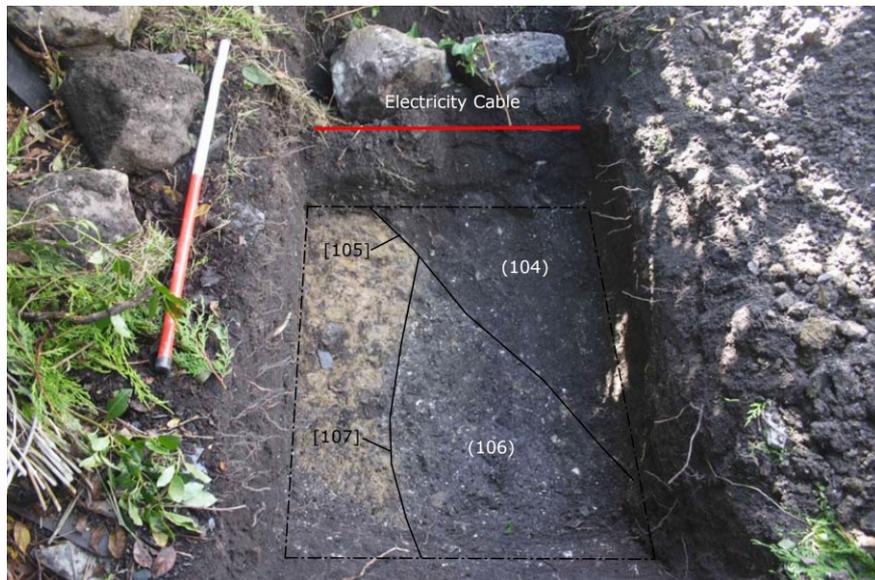
Evaluation trench at 15 Castle Street showing tops of probable medieval features gully 105 and pit 107.

15 Castle Street the foundation trenches for the extension.

7. Two archaeological interventions have taken place in this plot. An archaeological excavation took place here from about 1985-90 in connection with a small, now defunct, local museum located in a property on the opposite side of Castle Street. No records of this excavation survive, but a quantity of artefacts was reputedly

found. In 2003, a watching brief was maintained during building construction. The ground surface across the whole of the site was reduced by *c*.1m using a toothed bucket revealing mortared walls, cobbled surfaces, pits and a burgage plot boundary wall dividing the site in two. One-metre deep foundation trenches were excavated from this reduced surface. It would seem that the site reduction had removed the upper 0.10-0.15m of archaeological deposits. Finds recovered included pottery dating from the eleventh to the nineteenth century and quantities of animal bone. The pits suggest light industrial use of the site. Reference: Kelly S 2003 (HER 49482).

The frontage of the site following machine reduction.

An early wall revealed in the foundation trench.

A cobble surface and walls revealed in foundation trenches.

8. A watching brief was maintained during footpath renewal in churchyard of St Mary's parish church. Gravestones and nineteenth century vaults were recorded but noting of earlier date. Reference: Ratty 2014 (HER 106465).

ARCHAEOLOGICAL POTENTIAL

It has been demonstrated that archaeological remains from at least the twelfth century survive in the castle. Medieval and later deposits probably lie in the bailey to the north of the castle, but no intrusive archaeological investigations have been carried out here; geophysical survey has been inconclusive. However, the castle and north bailey is a scheduled monument and so archaeological investigations other than research projects and those associated with repair and maintenance are also unlikely to take place.

The potential for stratified archaeological remains of the twelfth century onwards have been shown to exist in the 'old' town, and are likely to be encountered just about anywhere. To date archaeological interventions here have been limited to small-scale evaluations and watching briefs; these are not adequate responses given the archaeological importance of the area and greater effort should be made to preserve deposits *in situ* or, if this is not possible, undertake full excavation. It is worth noting Morris words of 1975: 'No major re-development appears to loom and the designation in 1971 of the medieval core of town as a conservation area will, it is hoped, serve to safeguard, preserve and enhance its character, although the price must be eternal vigilance.'

Medieval development occurred outside the 'old' town along Water Street, Ferry Road, New Street and Bridge Street and along streets to the south of the river. However, these streets have an almost built up frontage, and as no archaeological interventions have taken place there is an unknown potential for surviving medieval and later deposits.

The environs of St Mary's Church have the potential for surviving archaeological remains associated with the church and the priory. The exact location of the priory claustral and other buildings is not known and therefore anywhere in the vicinity of the church is of high potential.

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

LiDAR https://lle.gov.wales/catalogue/item/LidarCompositeDataset/?lang=en

Research framework for the Archaeology of Wales
https://www.archaeoleg.org.uk/areasouthwest.html

Figure 1. Location map.

Figure 2. Modern map of Kidwelly showing the castle and 'old' town to the north of the river and St Mary's Church and the 'new' town to the south of the river.
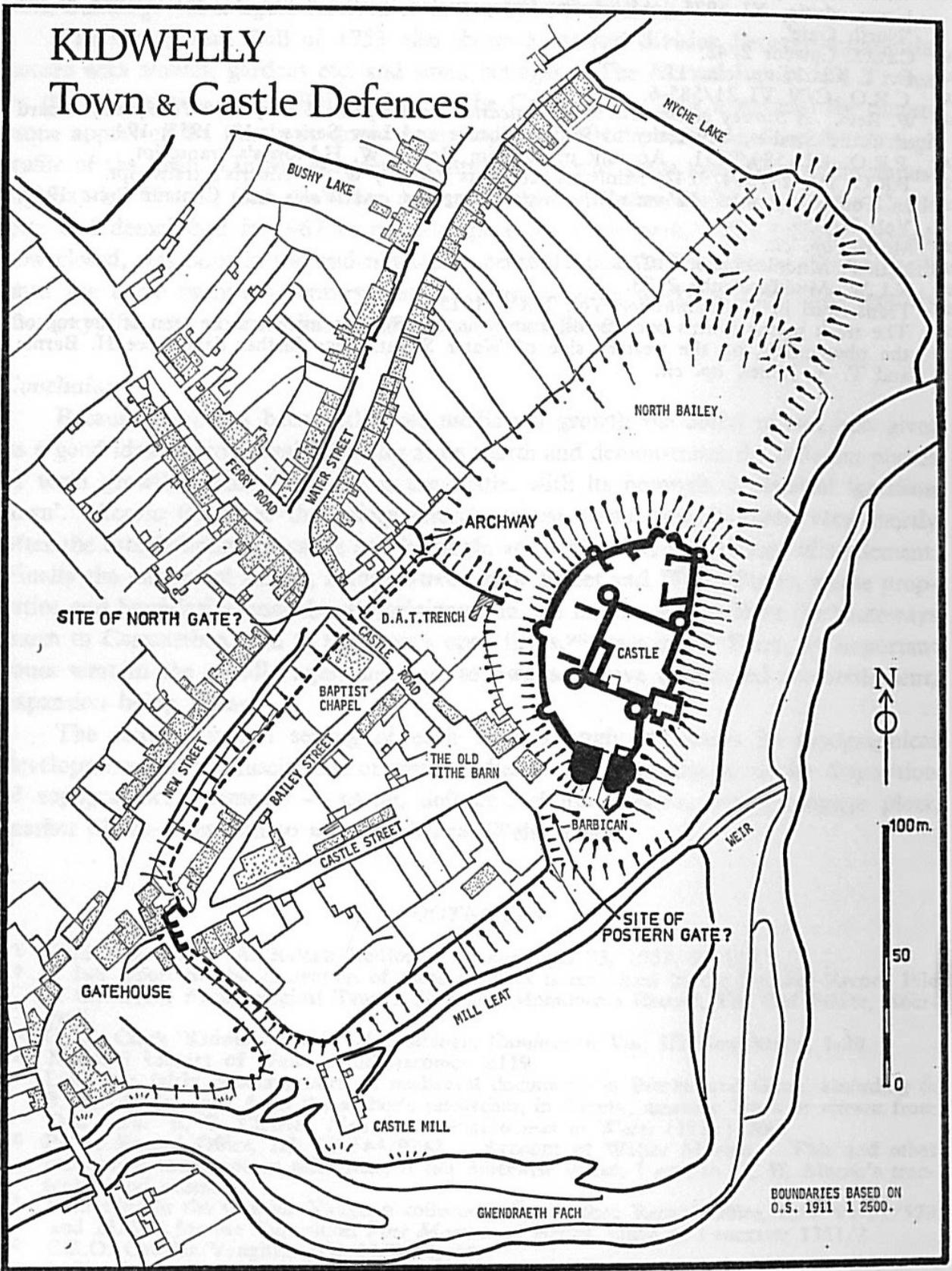
Figure 3. Map of the castle and 'old' town showing the line of the town walls (from James 1980).
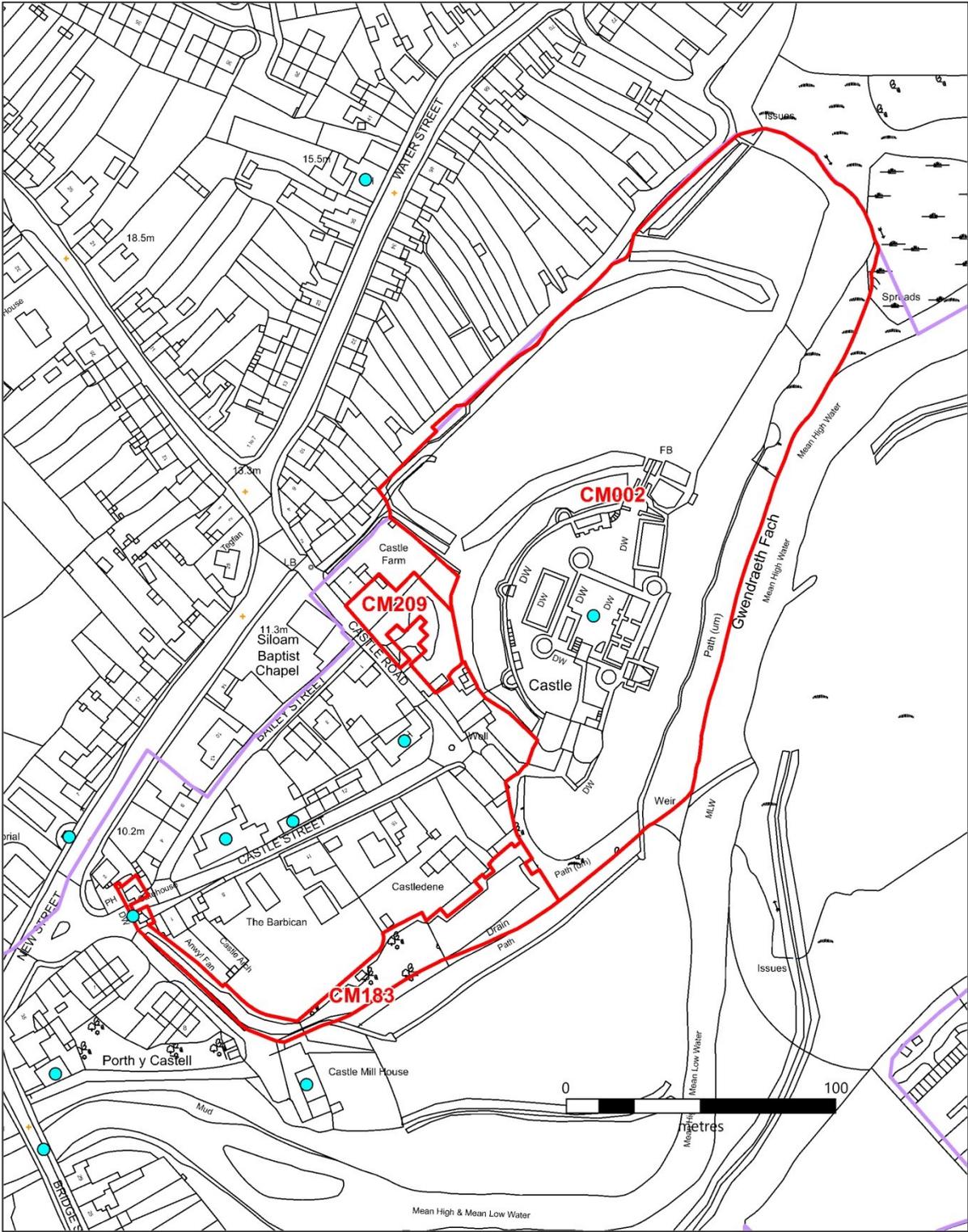
Figure 4. Kidwelly 'old' town and castle: Listed buildings (blue circles), scheduled monuments (outlined in red) and the conservation area (outlined in purple).
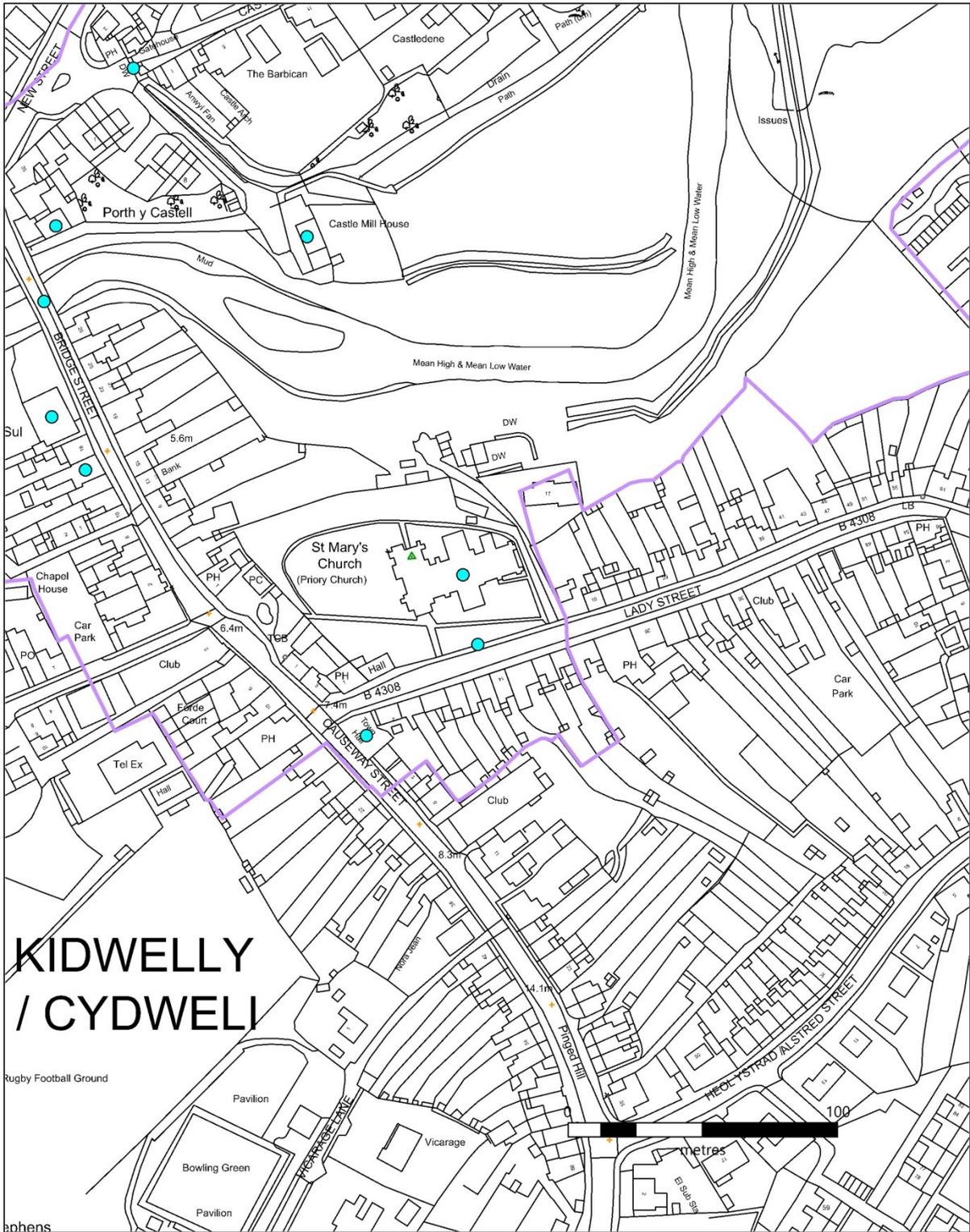
Figure 5. Kidwelly 'new' town: Listed buildings (blue circles and the conservation area (outlined in purple).

*Figure 6. Kidwelly: sites recorded on the Dyfed Historic Environment Record (red stars)
and the conservation area outlined in purple.*

Figure 7. Archaeological interventions. Note all interventions have been in or around the castle or in the 'old' town.
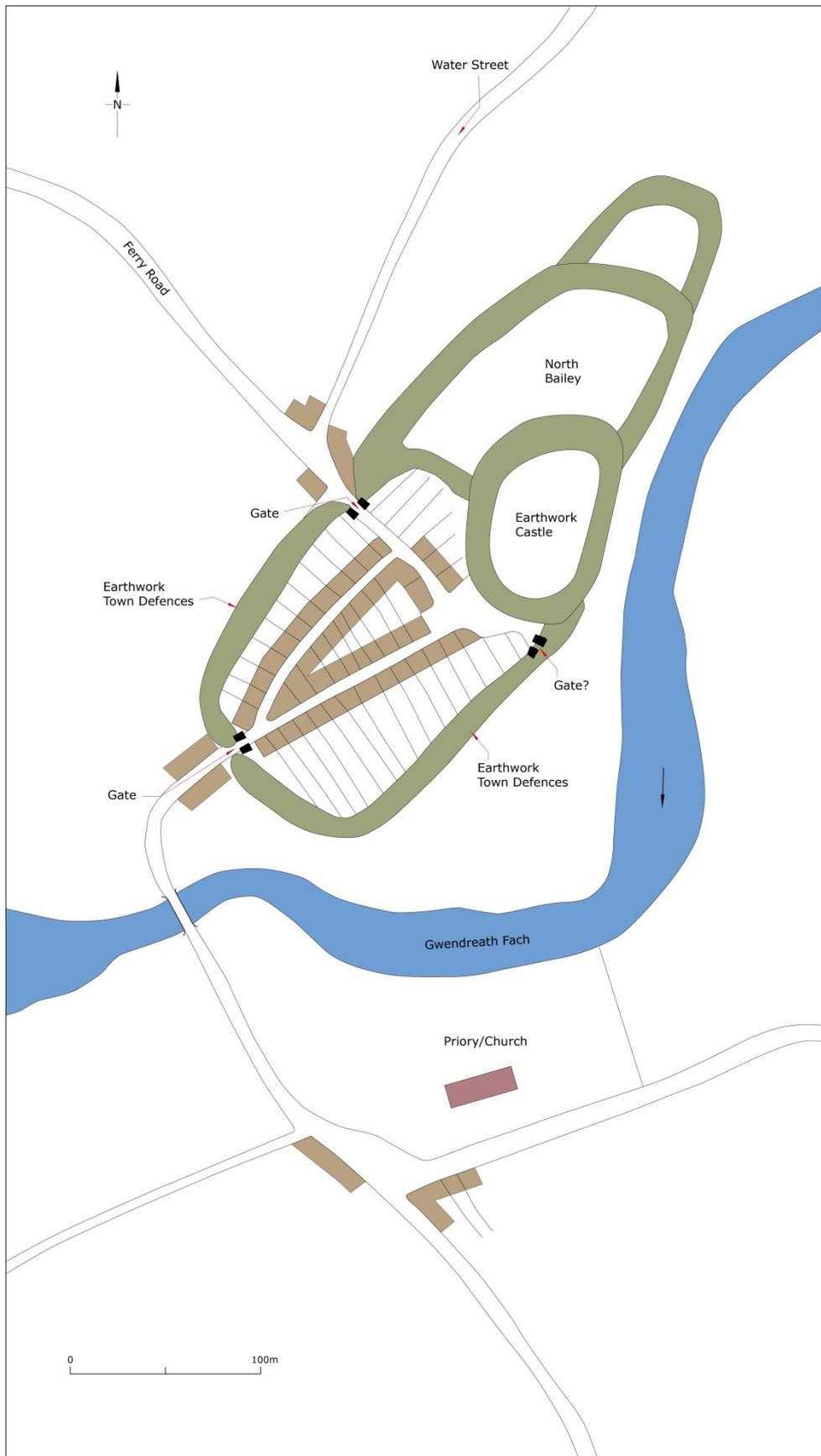
Figure 8. Conjectural plan of Kidwelly c.1150.

Water Street

-N-

Ferry Road

North Bailey

Gate

Castle

Town Wall

Old Market Place

Gate?

Bridge Street

Gate

Town Wall

Castle Street

Mill

Gwendreath Fach

Causeway/ Bridge Street

Priory/Church

Lady Street

Market Place?
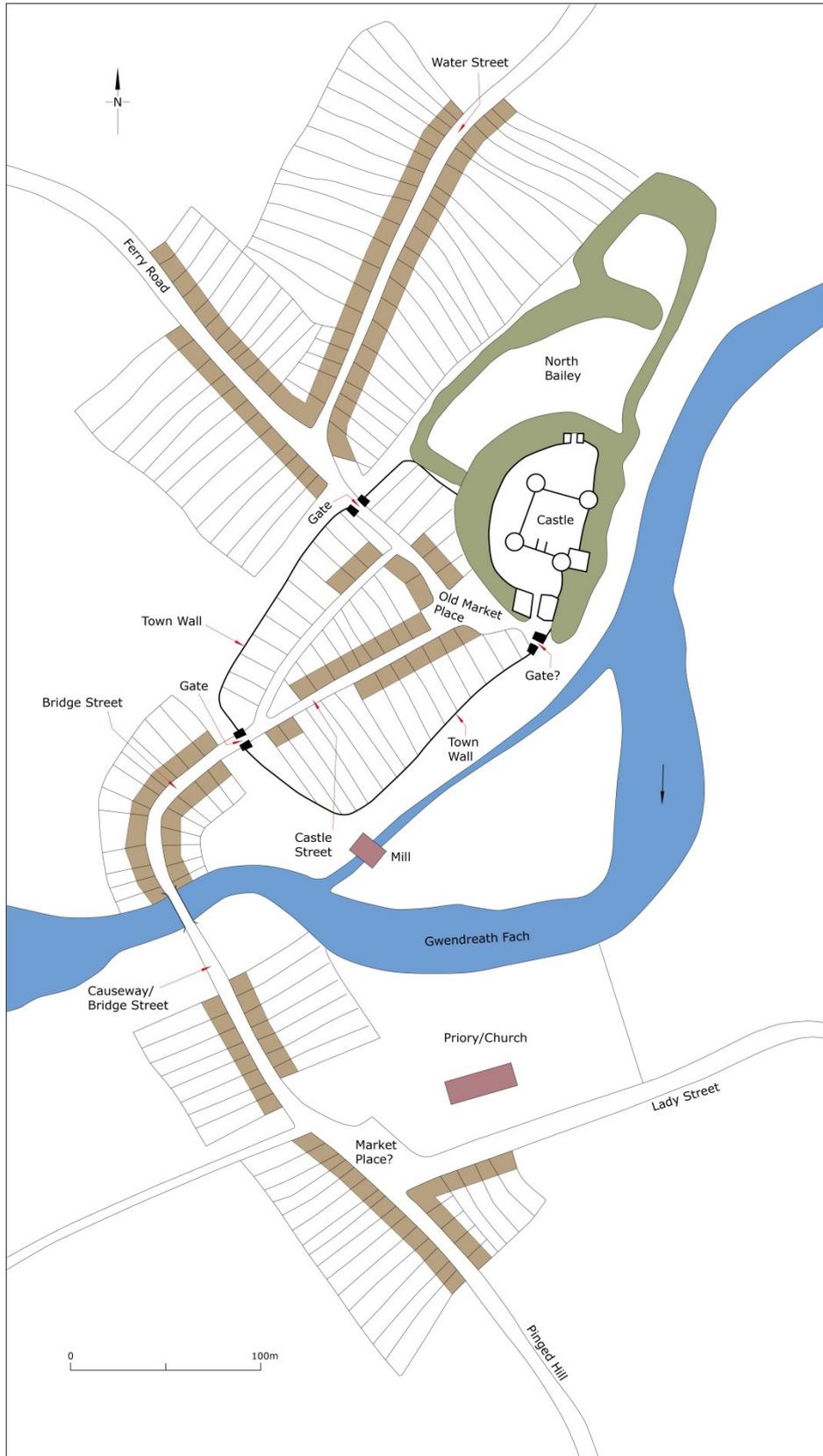
0   100m

Pinged Hill

Figure 9. Plan of Kidwelly as it may have been at its maximum extent in the medieval period, c.1320.