

# THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE MEDIEVAL TOWNS OF SOUTHWEST WALES

## WISTON



1993 aerial photograph of Wiston

Prepared by Dyfed Archaeological Trust  
For: Cadw



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By

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# WISTON

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Wizo founded Wiston, one of many settlements created by Fleming colonists in the early twelfth century in Pembrokeshire. A church and castle were built and a settlement laid out. Wiston was initially successful, but during the fourteenth century, perhaps earlier, it went into decline and by the later medieval period it was little more than a village, a form it retains to the present day. Investigations have demonstrated the high potential for archaeological remains dating to the twelfth century and later to survive in all undeveloped areas of the former town.

## KEY FACTS

Status: Not a town.

Size: Unknown.

Archaeology: Several archaeological investigations have revealed medieval deposits.

## LOCATION

Wiston lies on a rounded ridge in central Pembrokeshire (SN 022 181) at a height of about 110m in an agricultural landscape dominated by improved pasture, with a little arable land. Haverfordwest lies 7 km to the southwest and Narberth 9 km to the southeast. Llawhaden, formerly a small town lies on the ridge 4 km to the east.

## HISTORY

In the late first century AD the Romans established a fort at Wiston 500m to the north of the current village. A civil settlement developed to the south of the fort and continued in existence until the fourth century, long after the military had left. There is no known settlement in the area between the fourth century and the twelfth century.

It is from the Fleming Wizo that Wiston takes its name. Wizo arrived in southwest Wales a little before AD 1112 following the Anglo-Norman military conquest. Flemings served as mercenaries in the conquest, but Wizo came with a group of settlers intent on colonising the region. A castle and church were established at Wiston, but it is not until 1147 that there is a direct documentary reference to Wiston when the castle was taken by Hywel ab Owain. For the rest of the twelfth century and into the thirteenth century the settlers and the disposed Welsh disputed the territory with the castle regularly changing hands. In 1220 Llywelyn ap Iorwerth destroyed the castle and burnt the town – this is the first specific mention of the town. It is likely that the castle was not repaired following this attack; a new castle was built at Picton 5 km to the south.

There is virtually no documentary evidence for the town of Wiston, reflecting its decline in the later medieval period and modern times. That Wiston ever had borough status has been disputed (no charter has been identified), however an annual fair and a weekly market were held up to about 1600 and from the scant documentary sources available it is clear that the inhabitants considered that it had borough status; they continued to elect a mayor into the twentieth century. It is not clear when the population of Wiston declined, but the burning of the town in 1220 and the subsequent relocation of the castle to Picton may have been the trigger. It is likely that following the European-wide population crash in the mid-fourteenth century Wiston was little more than a church, a ruined castle and a few houses.

## **MORPHOLOGY**

Wiston can now hardly be called a village, it is little more than a collection of dispersed houses, a medieval church, a motte and bailey castle, and a modern school (Figs. 2-5).

Wiston Castle is the best example of a motte and bailey castle in southwest Wales. A substantial motte crowned by a polygonal stone-built keep dominates a large bailey to the south. The bailey, defended by a bank and ditch, may be a reused Iron Age defended enclosure (of which there are many examples in the region) and is sufficiently large enough to have accommodated the houses of Wizo's first wave of settlers. The Manor House, probably originally an Elizabethan structure but now reduced to the service wing, stands on the Green, an open space to the east of the castle.

St Mary's Church lies to the south of the castle. Apart from the church and the Manor House other buildings are few and dispersed and date to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Development in the latter part of the twentieth century includes a school immediately to the west of the castle and a few dispersed houses. Earthworks in Church Field, immediately to the north of the church, on the Green and to the south of the Green on the opposite side of the road are the remains of the sites of houses and burgages; these were surveyed and a plan published in 1997 (Fig. 5). Since then a single dwelling has been built in Church Field (see Archaeological Interventions number 1 below) during which an archaeological watching brief took place and houses have been built over former burgages and house platforms to the south the Green which were not subject to any archaeological intervention.

Lilley (1995) suggested the castle and church formed the core of medieval Wiston and that burgages were laid out alongside the road running south from the west side of the church and alongside a parallel road 300m to the east (this is now a footpath). However, large-scale geophysical work by Verbrugghe failed to detect any evidence for burgages in these areas. A more likely layout of Wiston as it may have been in the twelfth and

thirteenth centuries and based on historical, topographic and archaeological evidence is shown in Figure 7.

## **BUILDINGS AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES AND MONUMENTS**

### **Scheduled Monuments**

There are two scheduled monuments in Wiston:

Wiston Castle (PE077). The keep of the medieval motte and bailey castle is also a listed building.

Building platforms – the location of medieval houses (PE461).

### **Listed Buildings**

There are six listed buildings in Wiston: the medieval keep of the castle, the medieval St Mary's church, two listed relate to the Manor House, and two are of modern street furniture (telephone box and village pump).

### **Conservation Area**

The whole of the historic core of Wiston lies within the Wiston Conservation area.

### **Registered Parks and Gardens**

There are no registered parks and gardens in Wiston.

### **Registered Historic Landscape**

Wiston is not in a registered historic landscape.

### **Undesignated Historic Environment Assets**

There are nine historic environment assets recorded on the regional historic environment record of which seven are duplicates of listed buildings or scheduled monuments. Of the other two one is the place-name 'Longhouse' of a farm on the east side of Wiston.

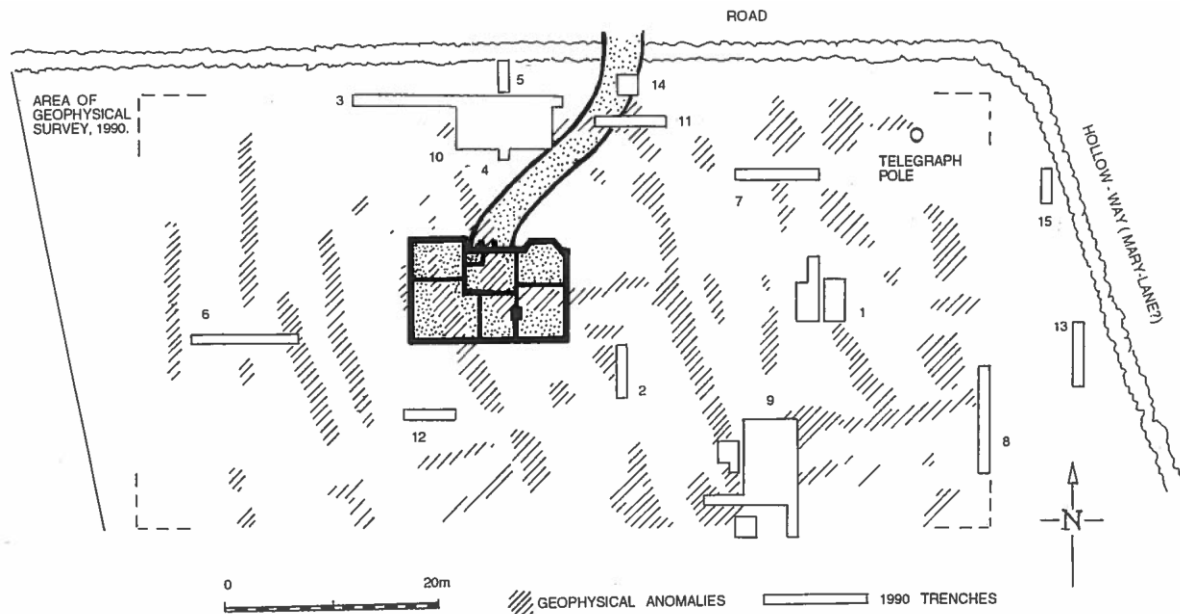
## **ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS**

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. 6).

1. A geophysical survey in Church Field was followed by the excavation of fifteen trenches in 1990. The geophysical survey identified possible burgage plot boundaries running north/south and other anomalies. Slight earthworks were present in the field. Remains of stone-buildings and timber buildings were

revealed in the trenches (3, 4, 5, 10, 11) on the north side of the field alongside the street frontage. The presence of burgage boundaries was confirmed in several trenches. Trench 1 was positioned over a pit containing the remains of a demolished corn drier. A twelfth-fourteenth century radiocarbon date was obtained from charcoal from the pit. Pottery from the excavations indicate that the burgage plots and buildings did not continue in use beyond the mid-fourteenth century. In 1997 a watching brief was maintained during the construction of the single dwelling and access drive in Church Field. Medieval pottery was recovered during the watching brief but no structural remains. The dwelling was set back from the street frontage; most of the buried archaeology in Church Field remained unaffected by the development. References: Murphy 1995; Turgel, Brennan and Austin 1997 (116355).



*Map showing the geophysical anomalies, the location of the 1990 excavations trenches and the location of the dwelling and drive built in 1997.*

2. Salvage recording of archaeological deposits during construction of a house immediately south of Wiston Castle in 1979 revealed two gullies, possibly the remains of a building, associated with medieval pottery. A later watching brief during the excavation of a drainage trench recorded possible property boundary ditches. References: Williams 1979; James 1991 (8510).
3. The tops of what appeared to be several conjoined pits were recorded as part of a watching brief in 1994 during the construction of Cawdor House. Roofing slate and large sherd of medieval pottery was found on the surface of the pits. The new house was set back from the road and it is likely that these pits lay in burgage

plots behind houses on the street frontage. Gullies, possible property boundaries were also noted. Reference: Murphy 1994 (29537).

4. Nothing of note was identified during a watching brief on a playground extension at St Aidan's School. Reference: Murphy and Darke 1995 (30154).
5. Nothing of archaeological interest was noted during a watching brief during the construction of a shed to the north of Wiston Castle. A possible pitch-stone floor was noted in a trench excavated for an electricity cable to the west of the shed. Reference: Crane 2002 (46410).
6. Nothing of archaeological interest was noted during a watching brief on garage construction in a walled garden to the north of Wiston Castle. Reference: Crane 2006 (56901).



*View of the topsoil strip during construction of a garage in the walled garden.*

7. The results of a geophysical survey on a plot of land containing low earthworks immediately to the north of St Mary's Church are difficult to interpret due to the small area available. The geophysical results in conjunction with the earthworks are compelling evidence that buried archaeological remains are of buildings. The site is a scheduled monument (116355).
8. A geophysical survey – magnetometry and resistance – inside and castle bailey and two areas immediately outside detected several anomalies but not evidence

for internal division of the bailey, nor of intense occupation. Reference: Geophysical Surveys 1991 (3541).

9. In 1994 a short programme of rubble clearance and recording preceded consolidation of Wiston Castle keep. The clearance work stopped well above the level of surviving floors, but it was possible to clarify the building sequence of the keep. Reference: Murphy 1995 (3541).
10. Verbrugghe carried out a 45 hectare geophysical survey in and around Wiston as part of his research at Gent University. The greatest density of anomalies was found on The Green, some of which corresponded to earthworks (Fig. 5), but overall indicates significant archaeological remains in this area, although no clear burgage plots could be identified. To the south of the village a series of field-boundaries were identified which together with extant boundaries attest to former strip fields.

## **ARCHAEOLOGICAL POTENTIAL**

Archaeological excavations, watching briefs and surveys have demonstrated the high potential for Wiston to address some key agenda items for research for the medieval period, including: Norman expansion into southwest Wales (town plantation, castle building and church building) and Welsh resistance and adaptation. It also has the potential to address post-medieval research theme on settlements (towns).

Excavation and watching briefs have demonstrated that undisturbed archaeological deposits dating to the twelfth century and to the fourteenth century, and possibly beyond, are likely to survive in all the undeveloped areas of Wiston. Although not unique in Wales, deposits of this nature are rare and have the potential to enhance our understanding of critical period in the history of Wales.

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

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

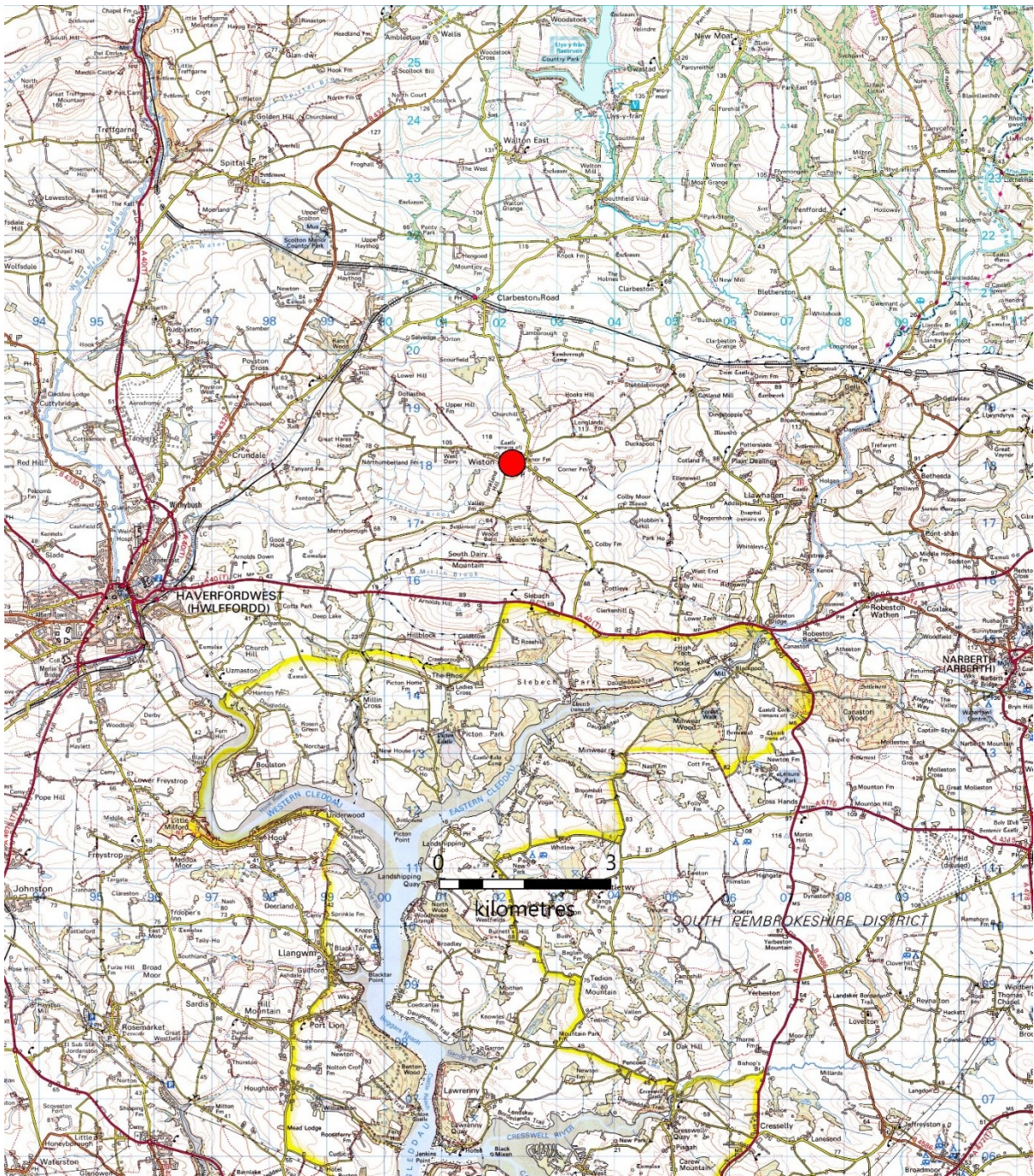


Figure 1. Location map.



Figure 2. Extract of the 1843 Wiston tithe map.

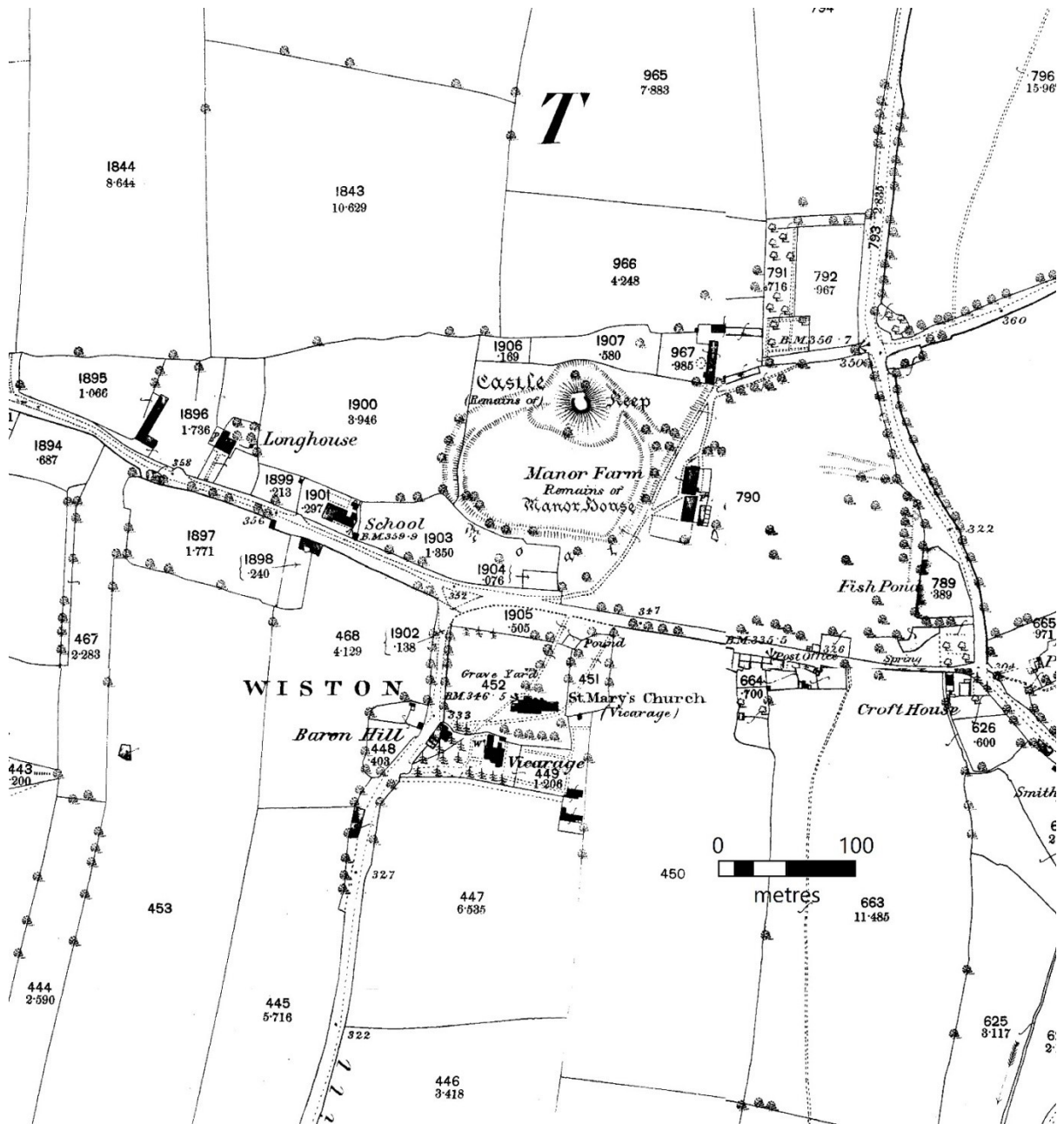


Figure 3. Extract from the 1889 Ordnance Survey 1:2500 1<sup>st</sup> Edition map (Pembs 23.14,15 and 28.02,03).

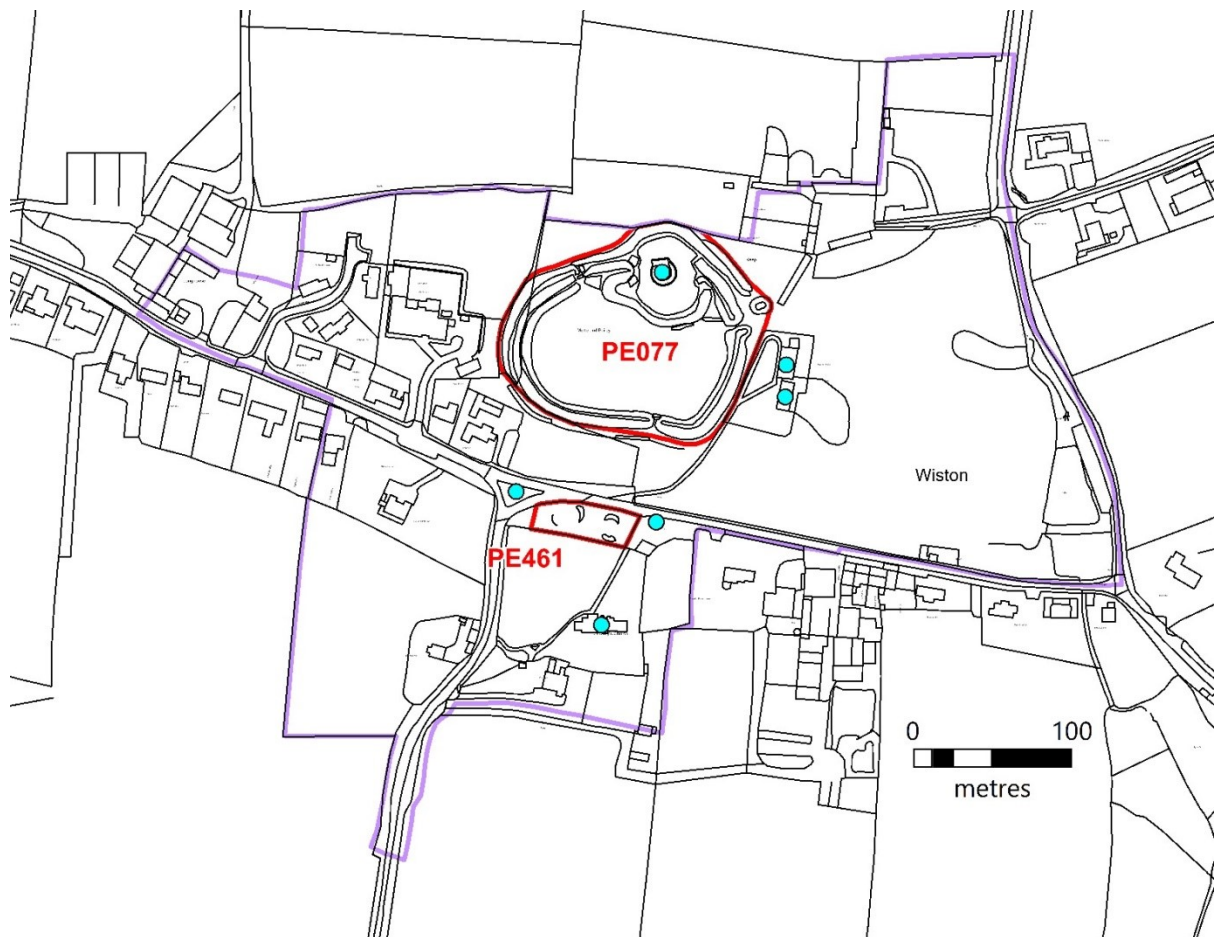


Figure 4. Listed buildings (blue circles), scheduled monuments (outlined in red) and the conservation area (outlined in purple).

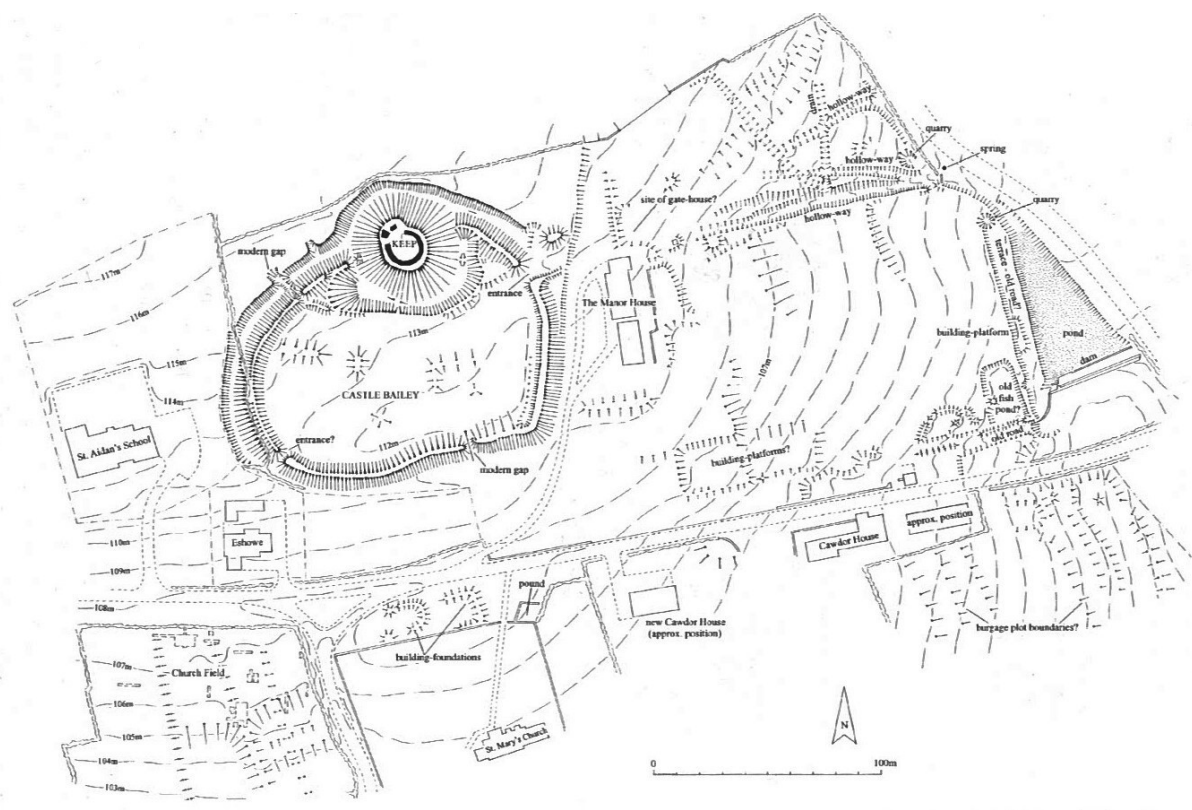


Figure 5. Topographic survey of Wiston from Murphy 1997.

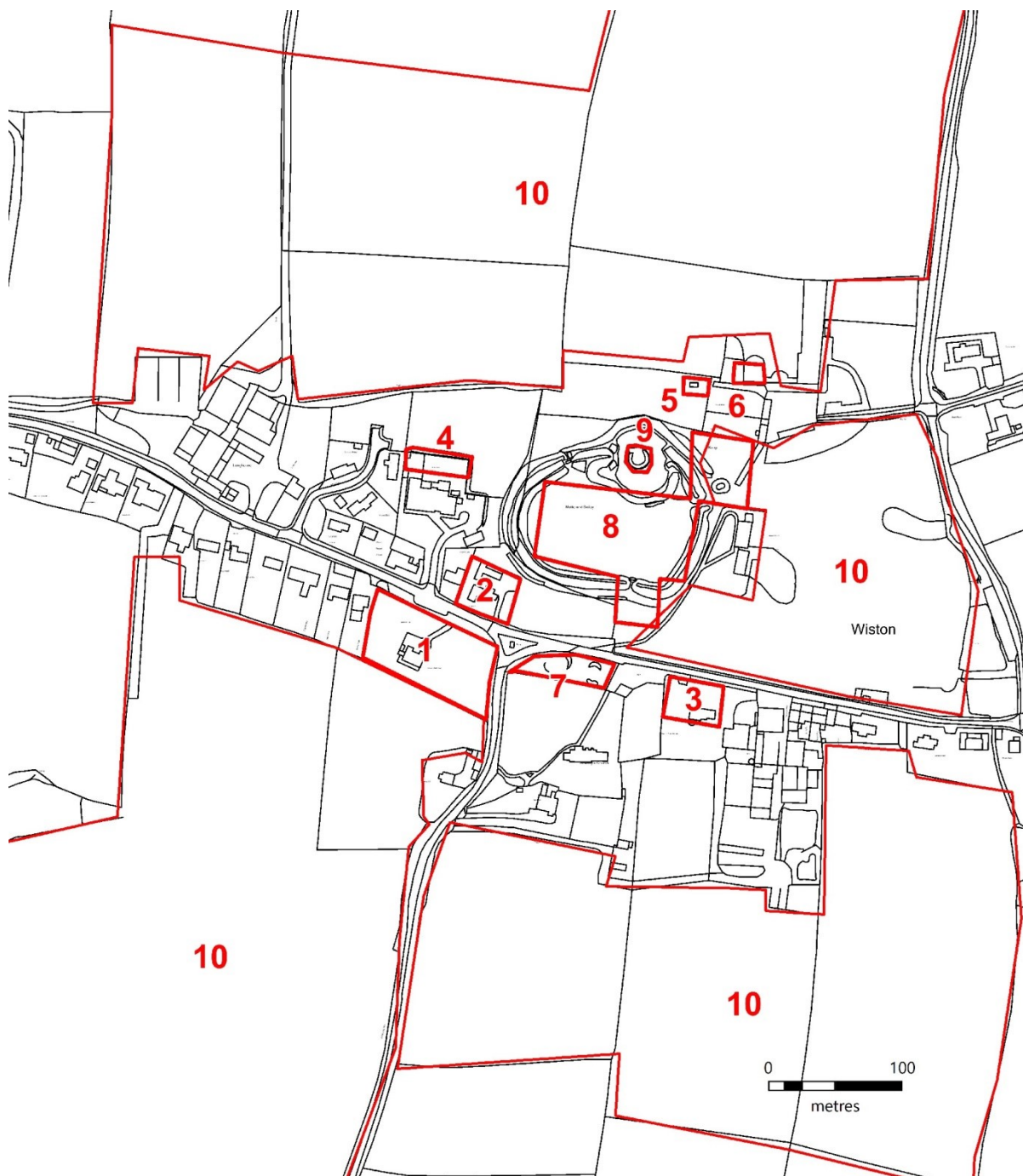


Figure 6. Location of archaeological interventions.



*Figure 7. Schematic plan showing a suggested layout of of Wiston at its maximum extent in the thirteenth/fourteenth century.*