

Cistercians and the urban community at Neath

By TONY HOPKINS

It is a pleasure to be able to begin this paper by citing the foundation charter of Neath Abbey, now available to historians for the first time in centuries.¹ Purchased at auction in 1990, the charter has now taken its place among the collections of the West Glamorgan Archive Service in Swansea. It is the first of three grants by Richard de Granville in favour of the abbey and dates around 1129.² It will be argued that each grant echoes a stage in the Normano-Welsh conflict that engulfed the Afan-Nedd area (Fig. 1) at the time and that donations of land to the abbey during the first century or so of its existence had a tactical significance in terms of this conflict.³ The location of the abbey and the growth of its estates was ultimately to have a direct bearing upon its relationship with the urban community at Neath.

A proto-urban settlement in the Neath area may be attributed to the establishment of Richard de Granville's castle on the western side of the river (Fig. 2). No precise date can be given for this castle but it must have been in place by the late 1120s when Norman aggression against the Welsh magnates was renewed in west Glamorgan.⁴ De Granville was a key figure in the attempt to consolidate the exposed western frontier of the Norman lordship of Glamorgan and he seems to have made substantial inroads into the territory ruled by the lords of Afan. A peace settlement which may have been reached before 1129 resulted in an exchange between de Granville and Rhiwallon, lord of Afan, in which the Welsh leader regained Coed Escob, an area in the hill district east of the river Neath. In exchange de Granville received the lands between the river Clydach and Constance's Cross on the west side of the river adjacent to his castle.⁵ Momentarily at least he had secured the west bank of the river Neath. It was at this point, in 1129, that de Granville made his first grant to the Savigniac monks for the foundation of an abbey at Neath. The grant included the area mentioned above received from Rhiwallon as well as land between the rivers Neath, Tawe, Clydach and Pwll Cynan, the chapelry of his castle and the tithes due upon the English and French tenants there.⁶ These were clearly the followers of de Granville living in and around the castle. While the beginnings of a settlement may be inferred from this the foundation charter offers nothing firmer and Dugdale's reading of a *ville* in the charter's boundary clause can now be rejected in favour of *vualle* ('wall').⁷ A later version of the charter added Welshmen to the tenantry.⁸ In a second charter de Granville granted the monks his castle and the whole of the land between the rivers Neath and Tawe. His third and final charter confirmed the previous two and added a substantial swathe of the territory that was later to become Neath Ultra.

The monks are almost certain to have built their monastery on or near the site of the founder's castle which, presumably, stood adjacent to the Clydach stream. They would have been eager to remove such a provocation as a Norman castle must have been to the native population and the inclusion of Welsh tenants in the charters suggests a concern for a degree of co-existence with the abbey's Welsh neighbours. Indeed, conciliation must have been an early priority of the abbey since de Granville had probably granted land on which he had no certain hold and the native population is likely to have resented owing suit to an incomer—knight or monk. But they would have been far more hostile to a landlord attempting to remove them from their homes as some Cistercian abbeys did. The survival of the indigenous population and, indeed, the growth of settlement on the west side of the Neath, is attested in 1207 by King John's confirmation charter to the abbey which protected the tenements of the burgesses of Neath and those of the Welshmen of the locality.⁹ Co-existence with the Welsh may not always have been easy, but it received royal support.

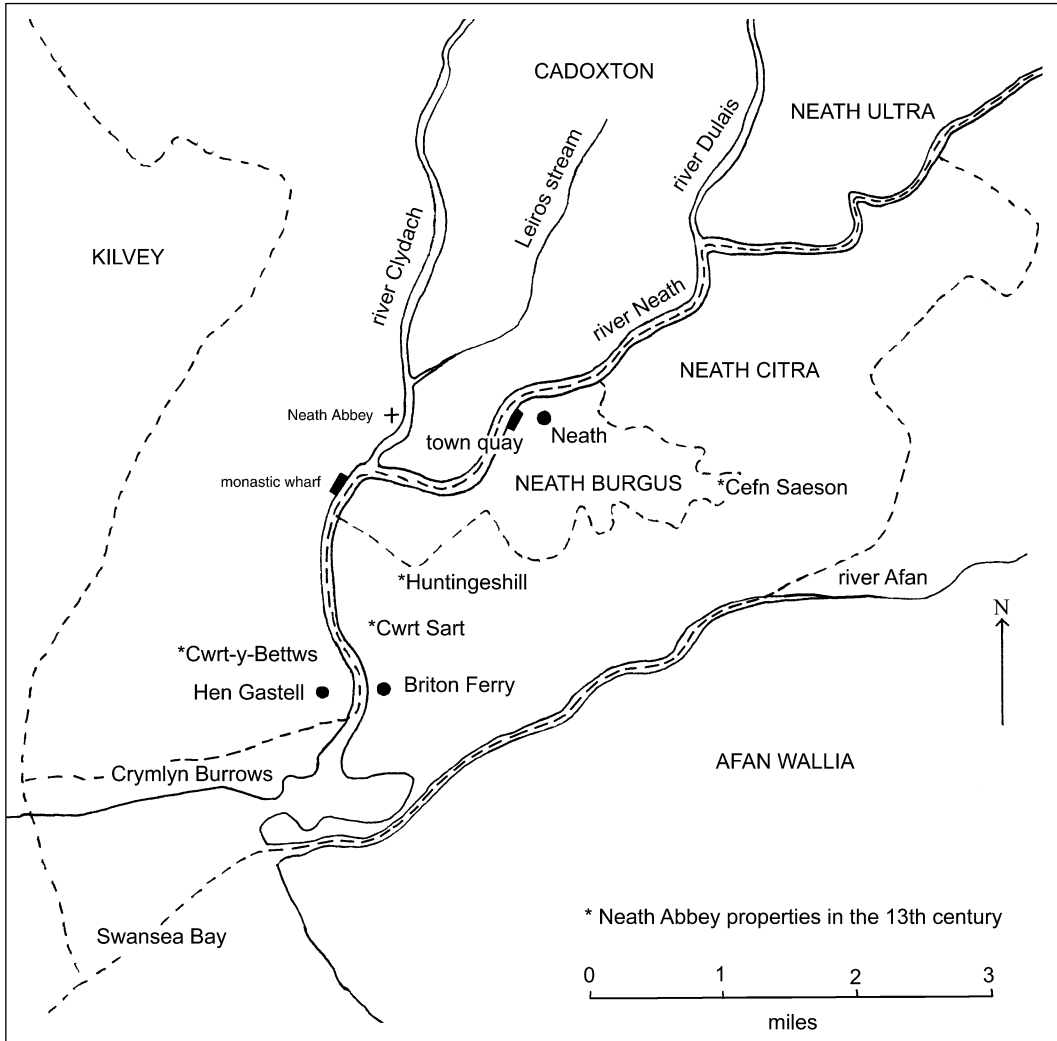


Fig. 1. The Afan-Nedd area in the Middle Ages.

Richard de Granville's pious inclinations may have been inspired by expediency. Each phase in his endowment of the abbey probably mirrored the course of the Normano-Welsh conflict in the Afan-Nedd area. Considering his second charter, for instance, it is inconceivable that de Granville would have given away his castle in the absence of a secure alternative in the area. Such an alternative, indeed, stood on the east bank of the river Neath in the form of the more recently established castle of the lord of Glamorgan, Robert Consul. It was in the protective shadow of this redoubt that the town of Neath had its beginnings. De Granville is recorded as Robert's constable as early as 1120 and for some time at least held his own and Consul's castle simultaneously.¹⁰ By the early 1130s we can assume that de Granville was engaged fully on the campaign to the east of the Neath and was operating from the castle on that side. Before this he had in some measure attempted to minimise the threat on the western flank of the river by placing a monastery there. Whatever progress de Granville may have made against the Welsh, he probably sensed

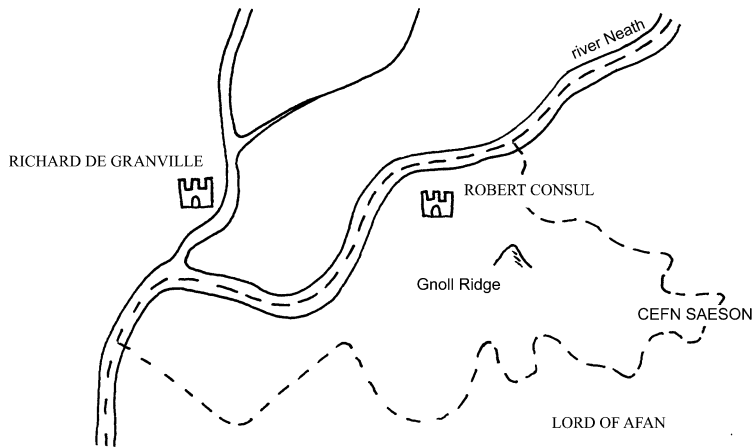


Fig. 2. The Neath area in the 1120s.

a native backlash at hand and by the time of the renewed fighting of the mid-1130s seems already to have left the area for retirement in Devon.¹¹ De Granville's departure possibly coincided with—may even have prompted—his final grant to the abbey which considerably extended its estates west of the river Neath. Nor were the abbey's holdings to be confined to that side of the river: indeed, long after the departure of its founder, the growth of the abbey's estates were to prove a significant factor in the tactical battle between Norman and Welsh down to the end of the thirteenth century.

The ebb and flow of the conflict in the Afan-Nedd area proved advantageous to Neath Abbey. Both Norman and Welsh protagonists at various times chose to endow the abbey with land where political ends are more apparent than pious wishes. After de Granville's initial benefactions the abbey began to extend its holdings in the area on the east side of the Neath. As early as 1132 Rhys ap Iestyn appears to have given territory in Resolfen in exchange for land at Cilybebyll although the charter may have lapsed quite quickly as the heirs to the lordship of Afan argued among themselves.¹² The lords of Afan seem to have favoured Margam Abbey rather than Neath in their benefactions and in 1175 the former was granted exclusive pasture rights between the Afan and Neath rivers. This promise was broken, however, in 1205 when Neath Abbey was allowed to purchase rights of pasture in the same area. The result was a bitter conflict between the two abbeys.¹³ But it was Leison ap Morgan who was to give Neath Abbey its most substantial acquisition on the east side of the river Neath. This was a large tract in the area of Briton Ferry out of which the grange of Cwrt Sart was to be created. It extended as far as Huntingeshill (Fig. 1), located in the Melencrythan area barely a mile south of the developing town of Neath. The date of the bequest is uncertain but it was before 1208 when it was confirmed by King John.¹⁴ It may have been through the same endowment that the abbey acquired pasture at Cefn Saeson an area on the eastern slope overlooking the town and within a couple of miles of Huntingeshill. It is possible that Cefn Saeson in the twelfth century described the area that ran from the Gnoll ridge at 200 feet up to a height marked today by Cefn Saeson Fach farm at 600 feet. In other words it indicates early Norman advances into the domain of the lords of Afan. Later local names have become superimposed on the tract to confuse its precise extent but it seems to have included Coed Escob (Fig. 3) the land released by de Granville as a precursor to his foundation of the abbey. Cefn Saeson remained an outlying part of the manor of Cadoxton after the dissolution of the abbey. It seems in no small way to have influenced the bounds of the borough of Neath when they were taking shape in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. It may also have been the grange attacked and burned by Morgan ap Owen in 1224 when upwards of 400 sheep and four servants were killed and a lay-brother seriously wounded.¹⁵

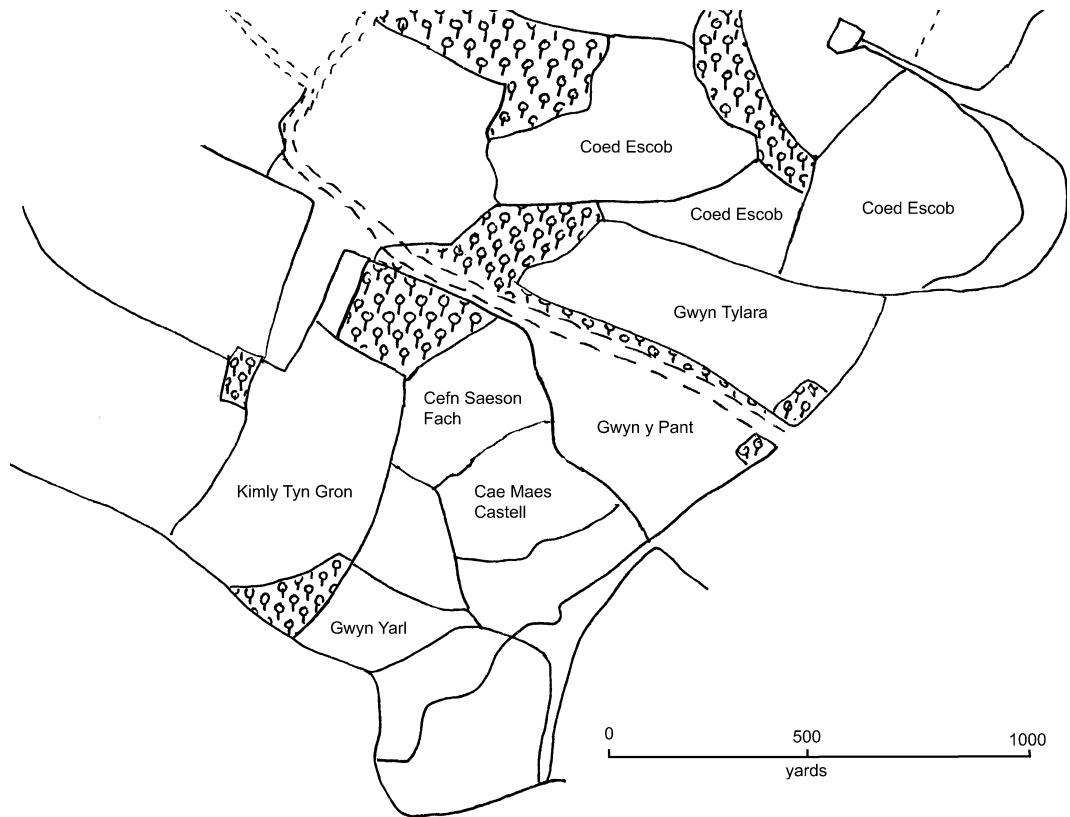


Fig. 3. The eastern salient of the borough of Neath, based on Gnoll Estate map, 1812 (West Glamorgan Archive Service, D/D GN/E/5).

The trend in estate building undertaken by Neath Abbey came to an end in 1289. In an exchange agreement with the lord of Glamorgan, Gilbert de Clare, Adam, abbot of Neath surrendered a major proportion of the abbey's lands in the Neath area including all its lands and tenements in Briton Ferry as well as the area later to become Neath Ultra.¹⁶ In return the abbey was to receive rents from specific manors and boroughs including nearby Neath. While the succeeding abbot of Neath was to protest that Adam had been an unwilling party to the transaction, there has been some suggestion that the abbey was ready enough to part with some of its more difficult tenants and was keen also to secure the lord's license to cut timber for rebuilding work that was planned.¹⁷ For the Neath area, the exchange had two significant outcomes. First, the lordship of Glamorgan was consolidated along its western boundary as the manor of Cadoxton became limited to an area south-west of the Dulais. Second, Neath Abbey acquired a considerable rental in the nearby town. The lord of Glamorgan certainly got the better deal.¹⁸ The value of the Neath borough rents assigned by Gilbert de Clare in 1289 was 114s 4½d; this had already fallen to 109s 2d by 1324, the intervening period being one of frequent Welsh uprisings and conflict making the collection of rents difficult and causing great damage to town property.¹⁹ Neath struggled to recover from the period of the Black Death and the Glyndŵr revolt and by the end of the fifteenth century was clearly still in decline. By the 1530s the abbey's rents were worth only 70s 9½d and dropping at such a rate that they were let to William Hopkins, the abbey bailiff, for 40s per annum.²⁰

After dissolution the abbey's town rental remained a distinct parcel within the earl of Pembroke's borough estate. As late as 1611 the 'abbot's rents' were still a feature of the town survey. By then their value had sunk to 53s 7½d.²¹ The rentals of the mid to late sixteenth century reveal the extent and distribution of the borough properties assigned to the abbey.²² Most of the dwellings were on the edge of the town's medieval core, rendering them relatively undesirable and more vulnerable during the tumultuous years of Welsh hostility towards the town.

In addition to income from properties received through the 1289 exchange, there are indications that the abbey enjoyed other possessions in the town although there is little evidence to suggest how or when these were acquired. A survey of the earl of Pembroke's holdings in Neath in 1570 included 2d rent for the 'monkhouse' sited in Gildinge Street.²³ This may well have been connected with Neath Abbey although it has to be borne in mind that Margam Abbey, too, had properties in the town.²⁴ A more startling reference to possible monastic property occurred in a *comptus* of 1492 when William Lewis, a monk of Neath Abbey, surrendered his house in the town to the lord of Glamorgan because his brother was said to have killed John Nicholl, the abbot of Neath.²⁵ The function of this house can only be guessed at but it may have been linked to the abbey's business interests in the town. Alternatively, the house may have been the monk's private concern—an indulgence hardly within the ambit of the *opus Dei*.

Both abbey and town can be seen as economic units frequently frustrated by the instability of life in a frontier region. Neath Abbey's widening commercial horizons might appear incompatible with the spiritual life but there were occasions when its economic activity may have been no more than an attempt to recover from adversity. It may have been the damage inflicted by Morgan ap Owen in 1224, or else some later Welsh offensive, that prompted two royal licences in the mid 1230s. The first, issued in 1234, permitted the abbot to buy corn in England for the maintenance of the abbey's household while the second, a year later, empowered the abbey's ship to trade in English waters.²⁶ The boost such measures may have given the abbey's trade was not indefinite. In 1315 the abbey lay 'devastated and ruined' after a Welsh rebellion (presumably on the death of Gilbert de Clare, earl of Gloucester) and sought relief from royal taxation, while the troubled Despenser period in Glamorgan saw the abbey, in 1336, seeking confirmation of the charter issued in its favour by King John because it had been 'ruined and worn' by warfare.²⁷

For its part the town of Neath was prey to similar depredations. It received its first charter between 1147 and 1183 when William, earl of Gloucester, granted its burgesses the liberties and customs enjoyed by the burgesses of Cardiff.²⁸ Frequent Welsh attacks on the castle during the latter half of the twelfth century inevitably hampered the growth of the town which remained little more than an adjunct to the castle garrison. The rising of Llywelyn ap Iorwerth in 1231 is evidence that the town, as well as the castle, was a target for Welsh hostility. In alliance with the Lord of Afan, Morgan Gam, Llywelyn's army destroyed Neath Castle and burned the town.²⁹ In spite of such reverses, the town was established enough for a three-day fair to be granted it in 1280³⁰ and thereafter its economic life was bolstered by a series of charters granted by successive lords of Glamorgan. The two most important were issued in 1359 and 1397. The 1359 charter reinforced the privilege of the burgesses by restricting trade in the lordship of Neath to the borough.³¹ These trading restrictions were confirmed by the 1397 charter in which the bounds of the borough (Fig. 4) were set down and the burgesses' own trading guild was recognised along with the town's market every Monday and its annual fair. Even with such underpinning the town remained small and unstable, ever the focus of Welsh uprisings. The death of Gilbert de Clare, lord of Glamorgan, in 1295, triggered an insurrection around Neath for which a fine of 200 marks was laid upon the district while in 1321–22 the castle and manor were destroyed by the enemies of the Despensers led by the earl of Hereford.³² The social and economic consequences of such outbreaks were profound. The impact of the revolt that followed the death of Gilbert de Clare in July 1314 can be seen in a surviving *comptus*

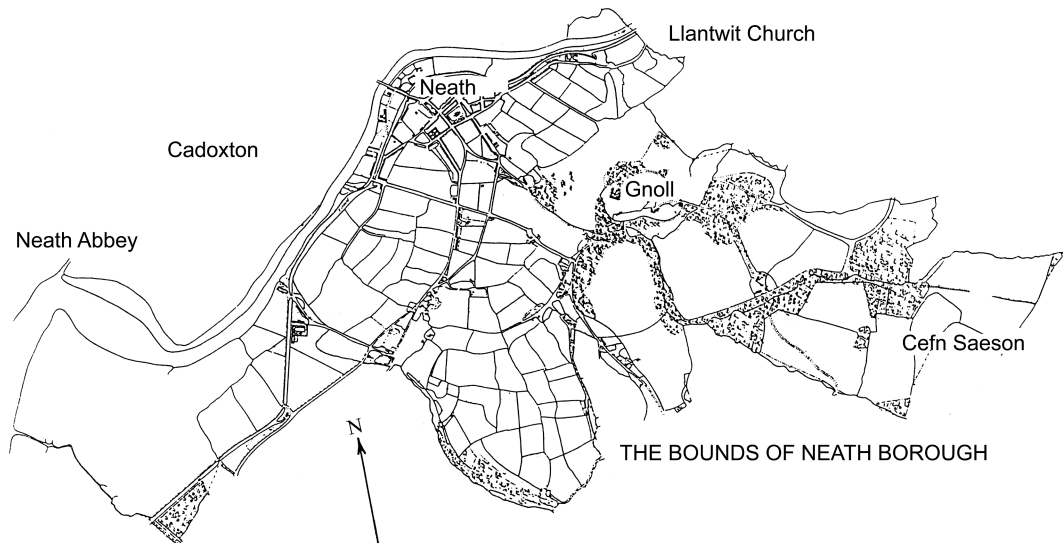


Fig. 4. The bounds of Neath borough, based on the Tithe map of Neath parish, 1845 (National Library of Wales).

roll in which 80 burgages and cottages in the town were recorded as burnt by the Welsh and yielded no rent while revenues from other sources were much reduced.³³

From the late 1340s severe outbreaks of plague compounded the difficulties of abbey and town alike and the Glyndŵr rebellion of the early fifteenth century caused further dislocation. Its repercussions were long-lived. As late as 1423 the abbot of Margam was empowered to excommunicate a number of people who had pillaged the abbey of Neath.³⁴ A sense of anarchy and decay appears to have lingered over the area and recovery was slow. The abbey may have begun its revival sooner than the town through the endeavours of Thomas, abbot of Margam who from the 1420s to the 1460s revitalised its spiritual life and restored the monks' material possessions.³⁵ It was certainly not all plain sailing for the abbey, however. In the 1490s it was evidently 'spoiled' during the 'great war' between the men of Carmarthen and those of the lordship of Glamorgan.³⁶ The effects of the conflict were seemingly short-lived, nevertheless, and peace and prosperity accompanied the abbey into the fifteenth century. Indeed, Neath's recovery was such that in the decades preceding dissolution its condition was the healthiest of all the Welsh Cistercian houses.³⁷ The nearby borough was less fortunate, however. While abbot Thomas was rebuilding the abbey, the town seems to have been unable to restore itself. In 1491–92 the town hall lay in ruins and the lord of Glamorgan had been unable to collect the fee-farm of the borough for many years owing to the poverty of the burgesses.³⁸ In spite of this there is some suggestion that the borough's merchants had established cross-Channel links with West Country ports and were trading in both cloth and coal.³⁹

It was probably during the late fifteenth century that economic competition between the town and the abbey began to peak. The river that had helped to isolate the abbey from the town in former times had become a point at which their commercial interests converged. Conflict was inevitable and in 1521 the tension boiled over. There were two sides to the argument: the burgesses believed that the abbey was damaging their trade by encouraging ships to discharge merchandise at its quay before proceeding up river to the town (Fig. 1). The abbot in turn charged the burgesses with riot, unlawful assemblies and causing injuries—presumably in attempting to assert their rights by force. The arbitration of the earl

of Worcester inclined towards the borough but was diplomatic enough—goods could continue to be discharged on either side of the river but only after the portreeve and constable of the castle had acknowledged their arrival.⁴⁰

The rivalry was probably sharpened by other developments. By the beginning of the thirteenth century the abbey owned pasture on the town side of the river. Its rights in Cefn Saeson must have been eyed suspiciously by the burgesses who were allowed pasturage in the same area by the lord of Glamorgan.⁴¹ The abbey's town rental cannot have helped matters either, the burgesses perhaps identifying the abbot with the marcher landlord who had assigned the properties to him. Indeed, Neath Abbey's resources in general may have been resented by an aspiring and often frustrated burgess-body in the borough. In 1291 Neath was second only to Margam Abbey in the number of sheep it possessed.⁴² Its other economic possessions in the Neath area included a coal-mine at nearby Court Herbert, watermills on the Clydach and fishing rights on both sides of the river which were safeguarded in the 1289 exchange.⁴³

The river Neath was a resource shared by abbey and town although there is no reason to believe that conflict over it was continuous. There is clear evidence, nevertheless, that economic rivalry resulted in acrimony on at least one occasion in 1521. Only rarely in Wales was a Cistercian abbey so close to an urban community for such a dispute to occur. The proximity of abbey and town was the result of the Norman militarization of the Neath area, the precise location of each owing something to the site of a castle. The age of the castle had more or less passed by the late fifteenth century while the age of the monasteries ended in England and Wales in the 1530s. The town of Neath, of course, was to survive both.

NOTES

1. West Glamorgan Archive Service (WGAS), A/N1 and see M. Wilcox, 'The foundation charter of Neath Abbey', *Annual Report of the Glamorgan Archivist* (1990), 17–8.
2. All recited in the confirmation charter of Richard, earl of Warwick and Lady Anne, countess of Warwick, his wife, 1468, in Walter de Gray Birch, *A History of Neath Abbey* (Neath: J. E. Richards, 1902), 323–4.
3. For the Norman invasion of Glamorgan see D. Crouch, 'The slow death of kingship in Glamorgan, 1067–1158', *Morgannwg* 29 (1985), 31–4, and J. Beverley Smith, 'The kingdom of Morgannwg and the Norman conquest of Glamorgan', in T. B. Pugh (ed.), *Glamorgan County History. Volume III: The Middle Ages* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1971), esp. 23–4.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Brian Ll. James (ed.), *Morganniae Archaigraphia: A Book of the Antiquities of Glamorganshire. By Rice Merrick* (Barry Island: South Wales Record Society, 1983), 40, where 'Bodesgob' is clearly the 'Coed Esgob' shown on eighteenth-century plans of the Gnoll Estate, e.g. WGAS, D/D Gn/E/1.
6. Birch op. cit. (note 2), 309–10.
7. William Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum*, 8 vols (London, 1817–30 edn), vol. 5, 259; cf. WGAS, A/N1 and James op. cit. (note 5), 53.
8. Birch op. cit. (note 2), 323.
9. *Ibid.*, 314.
10. Crouch op. cit. (note 3), 39, note 50 for de Granville.
11. *Ibid.*, 32–3 for the renewed fighting of the 1130s.
12. D. Rhys Phillips, *The History of the Vale of Neath* (Swansea, 1925), 117; see also James op. cit. (note 5), 109.

13. F. G. Cowley, 'Neath versus Margam: some 13th century disputes', *Transactions of the Port Talbot Historical Society* (1967), 7–8.
14. Birch op. cit. (note 2), 315–7.
15. L. A. S. Butler, *Neath Abbey* (London: HMSO, 1976), 8.
16. Preserved in the confirmation charter of 1468 in Birch op. cit. (note 2), 321–2.
17. William Rees, *Calendar of Ancient Petitions Relating to Wales (Thirteenth to Sixteenth Century)* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1975), 404; David Lewis, 'Notes on the Charters of Neath Abbey', *Archaeol. Cambrensis*, 5th. ser., 4 (1887), 101–2; Glanmor Williams, 'Neath Abbey', in W. Elis Jenkins (ed.), *Neath and District — a Symposium* (Neath: Elis Jenkins, 1974), 82–3; F. G. Cowley, *The Monastic Order in South Wales, 1066–1349* (University of Wales Press, 1986 edn), 245–7.
18. Cowley op. cit. (note 17), 247.
19. *Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem* (London: 1904–), vol. 5, 332.
20. National Library of Wales (NLW), Bute, M1/163/viii.
21. Glamorgan Record Office (GRO), CL/Bushby/v/2.
22. NLW, Bute, M26/10; M1/163/viii and iv.
23. S. A. Halewood, 'A Survey of the Earl of Pembroke's Glamorgan Estate, 1570', unpublished MA thesis University of Wales (1990), 446.
24. Cowley op. cit. (note 17), 240.
25. The National Archives: Public Record Office (PRO), DL 29/635/10334, m.8.
26. *Calendar of Patent Rolls 1232–47*, 69 and 108.
27. *Calendar of Patent Rolls 1313–7*, 263; Rees op. cit. (note 17), 404. For the Despenser wars Pugh op. cit. (note 3), 167–76.
28. Contained in the inspeximus of Thomas Despenser issued in 1397 in G. G. Francis, *Original Charters and Materials for a History of Neath and its Abbey . . .* (Swansea, 1845), unpaginated.
29. Phillips op. cit. (note 12), 53–4.
30. In the 1397 inspeximus, Francis op. cit. (note 28).
31. Ibid.
32. Phillips op. cit. (note 12), 54.
33. A. D. G. Hopkins, *Medieval Neath: Ministers' Accounts 1262–1316* (Pontypool: Nidum, 1988), 37–8.
34. Glanmor Williams, *The Welsh Church from Conquest to Reformation* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1976), 242.
35. Williams 1974 op. cit. (note 17), 85–6.
36. Ibid.; E. A. Lewis, *Early Chancery Proceedings Concerning Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1937), 192.
37. Williams 1974 op. cit. (note 17), 85–6.
38. R. A. Griffiths, 'The Medieval Boroughs of Glamorgan', in T. B. Pugh (ed.), *Glamorgan County History. Volume III: The Middle Ages* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1971), 353.
39. A. D. G. Hopkins, 'Economy and Society in Neath, Glamorgan, 1500–1660', unpublished MA thesis University of Wales (1993), 11.
40. Francis op. cit. (note 28); Williams 1976 op. cit. (note 34), 551–2.
41. Granted by the 1397 charter.
42. Cowley 1986 op. cit. (note 17), 88.
43. D. H. Williams, *Atlas of Cistercian Lands in Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1990), 55–6.