

# History Of Island House

## Chronology

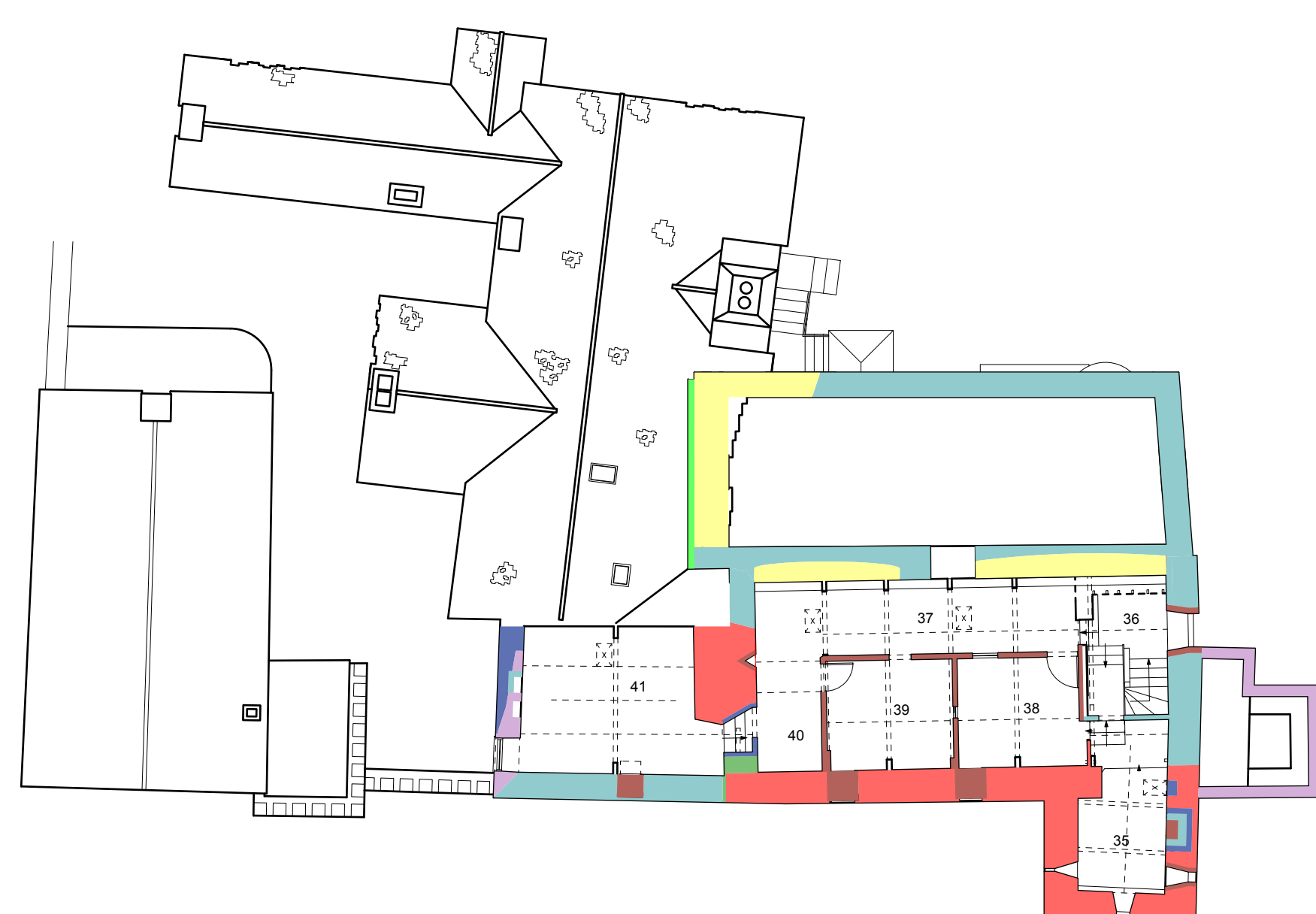
The drawings below illustrate the approximate period of building fabric. They assist us in understanding when each range was built or modified, building a picture of development through time.



Site and Ground Floor Plan



First Floor Plan



Second Floor Plan

## History

### 1. The origins of Island House

Remarkably, there is no early documentation relating directly to Island House. Careful study of the medieval town confirms that the house stood within the medieval suburb of town, outside of the town gates and close to the medieval mill and port. Some structural evidence suggests that the main street range is late medieval, but the site has far earlier origins than that. In summer 2020, two separate areas to the south and west of the house were excavated by Dyfed Archaeological Trust. This unearthed a complex series of footings, those to the west (on the car park side of the house) suggesting close proximity to the foreshore of medieval Laugharne - the footings of domestic walls rendered externally and clay-lined internally to prevent ingress of damp. Enveloping footings of the early 1200s were foundations of a much larger rectangular building (as well as a complicated series of walls of different phases). To the south, evidence of further buildings was found. The building then once extended further west and south. Whether it comprised a large single structure or a series of separate medieval dwellings on small burgage plots (later conjoined) is hard to say. If a single building, what was its function? A commercial inn serving the traders and pilgrims passing through the town is a likely option, or perhaps a large merchant's house with warehousing incorporated (separate warehouses on quays being uncommon until c. 1800). A short row of houses later joined to form a single dwelling is probable, explaining the very odd plan-form. The main part of the Wogan Street range appears to be late medieval, retaining remains of a chamfered doorway within and a slit window to the front 'porch'. Evidence suggests a substantial two-storey house with small front wing (perhaps housing a stair/latrines), the latter converted to a porch when the house was altered c. 1600. This house probably faced towards the sea, but all evidence of its seaward façade was lost when the house was extended later.

### 2. The sixteenth century

The property by this period was part of the estate of the descendants of the medieval Whites, who married into the Hawksbrook (Rhydderch/Prothero family) estate, which remained their principal home. In the mid-1500s, the south range was built, with its external lateral chimney serving a massive fireplace within. As investigative works/repairs have progressed, it is increasingly clear that the south range was built as a separate house. It was originally longer - extending both towards the present street and the sea - and was of three-room plan, the original cross-passage doorways still visible. The building was of two storeys, an upper room with a separate fireplace - so a substantial dwelling, the plan and design similar to houses of this date in South Pembrokeshire and Glamorgan.

### 3. The early 1600s.

The property appears to have been occupied by the locally notorious Rhys Rhydderch and his wife Dorothy. At this date (c. 1600), Island House was heavily remodeled. The medieval North Range was stripped out and given new beamed ceilings and new windows and doors added. Due to rather brutal later alterations, only one mullion window survives (porch) and during the current repairs, two beams were discovered in situ, another reused as a lintel. Whether the 1607 Bristol Channel Tsunami (or storm surge) precipitated the remodeling is open to question. The catastrophic impact on the communities along the Bristol Channel is well-known. Less is recorded about the impact on the Carmarthenshire coast, but one would have expected the properties on the sea front of Laugharne to have been inundated and some damaged.

Given the known ambitions of Rhydderch, it is possible that he conjoined a group of earlier houses to form a single large dwelling, conveniently close to the port and within view of the castle - did the tsunami precipitate this?

### 4. The Civil Wars - c. 1700

In 1644, Laugharne Castle was bombarded by Parliamentarian cannon during a week-long siege (29th October - 3rd November), captured and partially slighted. Rowland Laugharne's troops numbered 2,000 and it took two days of bombardment to breach the castle. Historians suggest that the use of artillery from Fern Hill posed a very significant risk of collateral damage to Island House due to its immediate proximity over the Coran. Mary Curtis recounts:-

*Island House, a most ancient and interesting one, is near the castle; its walls in some parts as thick as those of the castle. The projecting part of it is properly the middle of the house; the other half, extending on the other side of it, was destroyed by accident by the cannon-balls fired on the castle by Cromwell's soldiers. At that time a partisan of his was living in the house; and a small part of the half now extending out from the other side of the projecting part was destroyed; one of the balls was preserved in the house up to 1823. It extended farther out at the back; for on the outside wall, on the castle side, are two protuberances showing there had been a room; besides, foundations proving a building went farther out.*

The discovery of footings south and west of the present house confirms what Mary Curtis was told by locals. There is extensive structural evidence that the house was badly damaged by cannon fire, with much hasty patching-up of poor and rushed quality.

It may well be that the events of 1644 caused the conjoining of separate properties into a single dwelling. With the known loss of the west building, both ends of the south range and all of the roofs, it is logical that the owner of the site decided to make a single house from the shattered ruins.

Tree-ring dating has confirmed that the north range roof was replaced in 1656, the trusses of the south-west (sea-facing) range, in 1673. This - and structural evidence - suggests a gradual program of repair, whilst the addition of the south-west range allowed for the joining-up of the medieval north range and C16 south range. The south range with its massive fireplace must have formed a good ready-made kitchen!

The south-west range was so poorly built, that it was reconstructed in the early C18, reusing the old trusses. Little is known about the form of this extension, but it seems to have had (fashionable) corner fireplaces at the east end, suggesting the presence of rooms of high-status.

The east bay of the street-front range appears to have been the last phase of the repair work, rather more substantially built than the work of the previous generation.