Aberdare:

Understanding Urban Character

Cadw

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Introduction

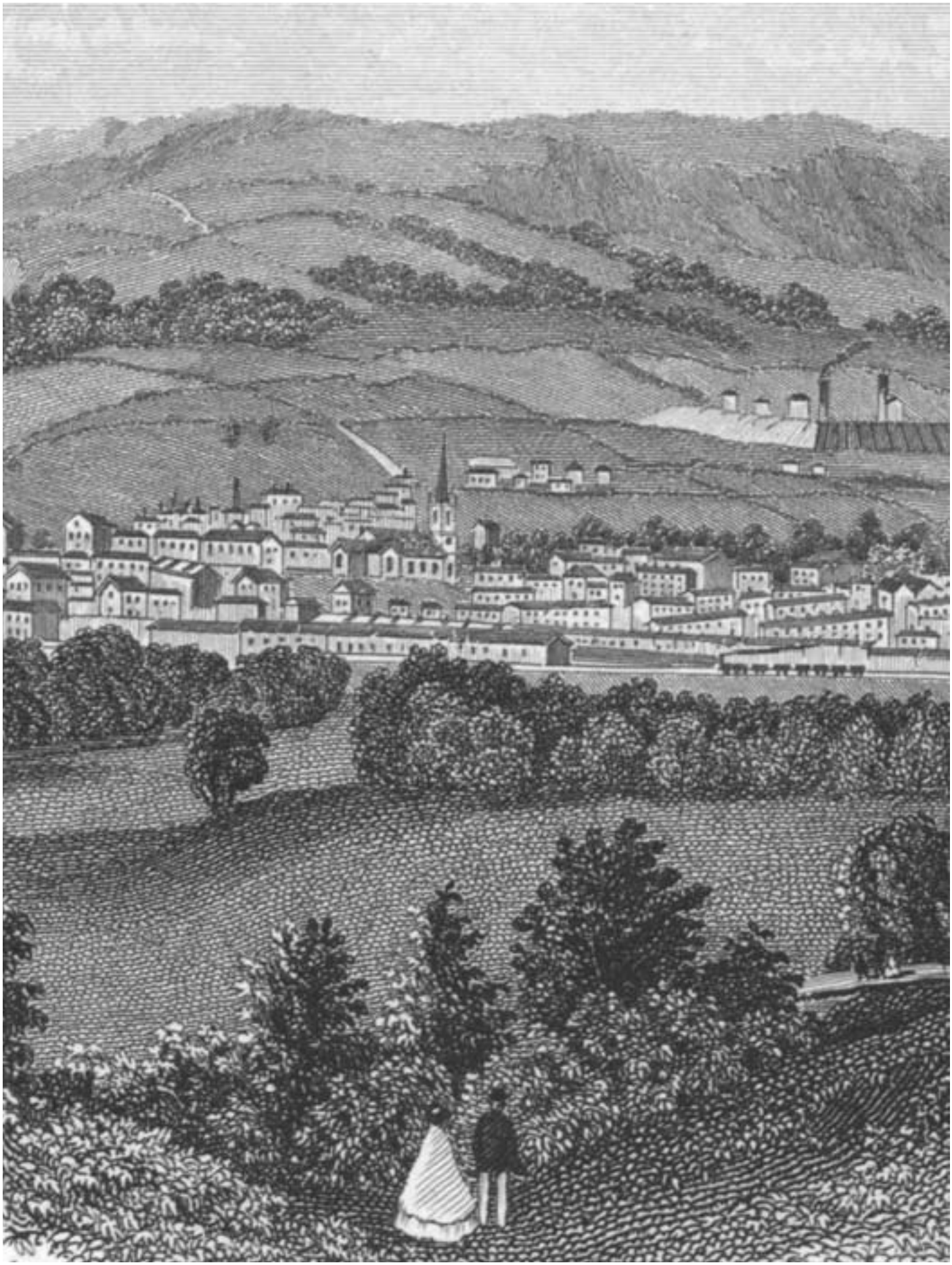
Aims of the Study

Urban characterization aims to describe and explain the historic character of towns to give a focus to local distinctiveness and to serve as a tool for the sustainable management of the historic environment. It seeks to inform and support positive conservation and regeneration programmes, help improve the quality of planning advice, and contribute to local interpretation and education strategies.

Urban characterization defines the distinctive historical character of individual towns, and identifies the variety of character within them, recognizing that this character is fundamental to local distinctiveness and pride of place, and is an asset in regeneration. It looks at how the history of a town is expressed in its plan and topography, in areas of archaeological potential, and in its architectural character. This survey is not just an audit of features, but a reconstruction of the themes and processes which have shaped the town.

The immediate context for this study is as a contribution from Cadw towards Rhondda Cynon Taff Council's Stage Two bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund for a Townscape Heritage Initiative in Aberdare. This initiative seeks not only the regeneration of the town through the conservation of its built environment, but also encourages greater access to, and understanding of, cultural heritage and the historic environment. Although the Townscape Heritage Initiative is focused on the Aberdare Conservation Area, this characterization study examines the historic character of the whole of the built-up area of the town, setting the conservation area in a wider context, and providing a baseline for strategic planning as well as local management. In this way, the study offers linkages to a wider regeneration agenda, including Rhondda Cynon Taff's own regeneration strategy as well as the Heads of the Valleys Initiative and Spatial Plan objectives.

Monk Street and St Elvan's Church in about 1955 (© The Francis Frith Collection).



Historical Development

'Few towns in South Wales exhibit more improvement in the last ten years than Aberdare. It is situated in a beautiful vale, in the midst of rich coal and iron mines, which furnish ample employment to its fast increasing population… In 1841 it had 6,471 inhabitants, and in 1851, 14,908, and it is now nearly double that number'. [1]

'From an inconsiderable village, it has become a town of great importance'. [2]

Aberdare became a town as a direct result of industrialization, associated first with the local production of iron, and then with coal. Its growth was rapid: in 1833 it was still a village; twenty-five years later it was a town, with extensive commercial enterprise, a series of churches, chapels and urban institutions, and a Board of Health in recognition of its urban status. In the years that followed, its residential areas expanded as the population grew: 'In the 1850's, the parish of Aberdare, where the population increased from 14,999 in 1851 to 32,299 in 1861, was the most dynamic place in Wales.' [3]

That there was a medieval settlement here is still indicated by the age of the church of St John. Aberdare lay within the commote of Miskin in the hundred of Penychan, whose centre was Llantrisant, and the church here was founded as a dependent chapelry. But, notwithstanding small-scale coalworking documented from the seventeenth century, and an accompanying process of encroachment onto Hirwaun Common to the north, Aberdare was still a small village at the start of the nineteenth century.

Industrialization

The Iron Industry

The beginnings of industrial growth were already apparent at the beginning of the nineteenth century: in 1803, Benjamin Malkin 'found the village of Aberdare more populous and better arranged than I had expected. This is to be attributed to its having become a manufacturing place… I was glad to escape from the contusion of anvils, the blast of furnaces, and the whirl of wheels'. [4]

There were five major ironworks dominating the local economy. The first to be established in the area were the works at Hirwaun, founded in 1757 as a charcoal ironworks, leased by Anthony Bacon in 1780, and by William Crawshay II in 1816. Crawshay was responsible for developing the site from two furnaces to four, and increasing its output. Llwydcoed and Abernant, founded in 1800 and 1801 respectively, were managed together as the Aberdare Iron Company after 1846, continuing in production until 1875. Closest to the town, the Gadlys Ironworks opened in 1827 on land leased from the Bute estate, and continued in production until 1876. The mineral estate on which the Aberaman Ironworks was established was purchased in 1837 by Crawshay Bailey, and three furnaces were built there in 1845. The works were taken over by the Powell Dyffryn Company in 1867, who exploited the mineral ground but abandoned the works.

Far left: The church of St John was at the centre of the original village.

Left: Kilns at the site of the former Gadlys Ironworks.

Opposite: A view of Aberdare from Abernant in an engraving of 1865 (By permission of Rhondda-Cynon-Taff Libraries).

The Rise of Coal

All of these ironworks depended on a large mineral estate to provide the raw materials for production. One of these raw materials was coal, initially exploited primarily as the fuel for iron production. However, the qualities of the local coal and its suitability for use with steam engines assured it a wider market. In 1837, Thomas Wayne (whose father was the proprietor of the Gadlys Ironworks) sunk a pit at Abernant y Groes, Cwmbach, and established the Aberdare Coal Company, selling high-quality coal on the open market. Others followed and by 1841 coal output from the valley was 12,000 tons, by 1852, 500,000 tons, and by 1870, 2,000,000 tons. The iron industry around Aberdare declined in the second half of the nineteenth century, and there were no blast furnaces in operation by 1875. However, the fortunes of the town were assured by the parallel ascent in the importance of coal, and it was this which dominated the economy of the town in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Transport Links

The ironworks (and later the collieries) depended for their success on the development of transport networks to connect sources of supply with the sites of production, and to link produce to markets via the port of Cardiff. In 1804, the works at Hirwaun and Abernant were connected by tramroad to the Neath–Glyneath Canal, and in 1811, Aberdare was linked to the Glamorgan Canal at Abercynon. In addition, Aberdare's growing economic status was indicated by its connection to a regional network of railways. It was first linked to the Taff Vale Railway at Abercynon in 1847, and then in 1851 the Vale of Neath Railway Company opened a branch line to Aberdare. In 1865, the line went beyond Aberdare to Cwmdare, whilst in 1863, the West Midlands Railway arrived from Pontypool. The coming of the railway may have encouraged the reorientation of the town: Canon Street and Commercial Street developed on a new axis leading to the station, diminishing the importance of the earlier High Street.

Urban Growth

'The village is losing its rural character… there is a multiplication of houses in every direction' [5]

There is little physical trace of pre-industrial settlement in Aberdare, although the church of St John is medieval, perhaps of about 1300. It may be assumed that early settlement lay in the vicinity of the church, which occupies a distinctive near-circular churchyard (albeit truncated in the mid- to late twentieth century). It was in this area that at least one vernacular building survived until it was demolished for road-widening in 1875: photographs show a small cottage of traditional construction of rough boulder walls and a thatched roof. Photographs also show an earlier generation of buildings than those which survive in this area (for example, on the site of The Constitutional Club). The earliest surviving maps record the pre-urban settlement pattern, and confirm that the main locus of settlement was close to the church. Yates' map of 1799 shows development confined to the area north of the river Dare. [6] A Bute estate map of 1825 also labels this area as the site of Aberdare village. The 1844 tithe map, too, shows that this was the nucleus of the pre-industrial village, the informal pattern of settlement here contrasting with the planned development characteristic of Aberdare during the nineteenth century. However, twentieth-century clearance and re-development obliterated the traces of this early part of the town.

The rise of industry in the early years of the nineteenth century generated some new settlement outside this immediate area. The typical pattern of growth in early industrial communities was for small groups of houses to be built piecemeal in close proximity to the site of the works, with informal development springing up wherever marginal land was available for building. Initially, Aberdare appears to have been no exception to this: the tithe survey shows scatters of housing to the north-west of the present town centre, in the vicinity of Gadlys, alongside the road to Hirwaun, and at Trecynon. Traces of this development survive, distinguishable as small rows of low cottages — for example, at Dover Place, Gadlys Road, East Avenue, and the old Hirwaun Road.

Urbanization proceeded in several distinct and deliberately planned phases. The form of urban development was a direct reflection of the

ownership structure of the area, in which two major landowners were particularly influential. One of these was Lord Bute: he claimed descent from the Earls of Pembroke who, since 1547, had been lords of the manor of Miskin in which Aberdare lay. The estate had a mineral office at Maerdy House — its name suggesting that perhaps it was the site of an earlier manorial steward's house — near the centre of Aberdare.

The church of St Elvan, built by the Bute family in 1851, is the most conspicuous testimony to the Bute presence in the town; much of the urban development south of the church also owes its existence and character to the estate. An early phase of planned urban growth is shown on an estate map of 1825. The map shows land marked out in regular plots for building along the south and east sides of the mound on which St Elvans was later built. The tithe survey of 1844 confirms this layout as built: its neat plot structure contrasts with the nucleus of the earlier village in the High Street area. Also on Bute land, Cardiff Street, Bute Street, and the south side of Commercial Place (now Victoria Place) were built up to a considerable extent in the years between 1825 and 1844.

Small industrial vernacular cottages on Gadlys Road (left) and Hirwaun Road (below).

Detail from a Bute estate map of 1825, showing the Victoria Square area laid out for development (Glamorgan Record Office DBE/1).

Ten years later, there was another major investment in urban development on land to the north of the river Dare: Maes y Dre was the property of the Diocese of Gloucester, the second major landowner, who had owned this land since about 1540. The streets were laid out, and plots for building were leased in 1854. This development included the establishment of Canon Street, with large commercial buildings on its north side and a sizeable residential area behind it. The diocese also owned land to the north of Commercial Street (the south side was Bute estate land), and buildings here were described as cottages in the tithe survey. However, in later years, following the arrival of the railway in 1847, the street was almost certainly redeveloped for commerce.

The core of the town — Canon Street, Commercial Street and Cardiff Street — was subject to periodic redevelopment in response to successive phases of commercial pressure. Historical photographs in Aberdare Library document several phases of building, rebuilding or remodelling, and it is clear that buildings within this central area have had a volatile history. In particular, some of the features that now seem particularly distinctive in the town — the ornate decorative render, for example — are revealed as secondary.

Three phases in the evolution of Aberdare: The near-circular churchyard of St John's Church (top left), Bute development curving around the church of St Elvan, and the regular grid of Maes y Dre (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).

Maes y Dre may have been the first of the workers' housing areas to be developed, but by 1865, the town had taken on much of its present form and most of its extent. By this time, there had been further development to the south, where Foundry Town (sometimes known as Daviestown) was developed on land which was in the ownership of Mr Griffith Davies in 1844 (part of Ynysllwyd Farm). Also, there had been extensive planned development at Gadlys. After about 1865 however, the pace of expansion slowed down and was confined to relatively small additional plots of land. By the end of the century, two fields (owned by the Bute estate) adjacent to Foundry Town were being developed, and farmland on the north side of Monk Street was laid out for housing (now Pendarren Street and Clifton Street). There was also sporadic growth elsewhere, including the establishment of Tudor Street and Elm Street, about 1890–1900 and 1900–1910 respectively.

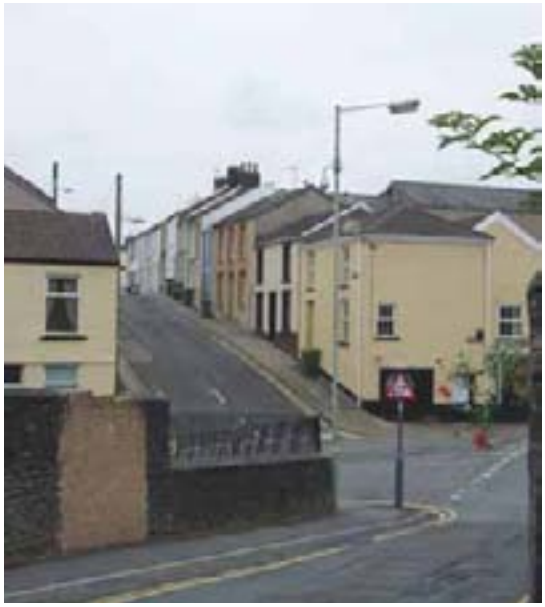
Later development within the limits of the town is rare. There are some modern housing developments to the west of Monk Street and to the south-east of The Grove, but these aside, the integrity of the nineteenth-century industrial town has remained intact. Twentieth-century development has had the greatest impact in areas of redevelopment and renewal. Clearance was concentrated in the areas of Green Street and High Street, the earliest part of the settlement, and on Cardiff Street. Elsewhere, the greatest losses (and they are considerable) have been of detail. In the town centre, commercial development pressure and previous renewal work have wrought significant damage, taking a heavy toll on original detail including shop fronts, windows, and finishes. But it is the residential areas which have been the hardest hit: wall finishes, roofing materials, chimneys, and joinery detail have all fallen victim to 'improvement' programmes which were not informed by an understanding of historical character. Fragmentary survival of original detail is all that remains and is now a precious archive that should be recorded. From this detail it should be possible to reconstruct some sense of the distinct historical character of the different areas.

Historical Topography

The town lies close to the confluence of the rivers Dare and Cynon: the historical core of the settlement lay on low ground on the north bank of the river Dare, whilst the first phase of expansion occupied the gently rising ground to its south. A dramatic intervention in the natural topography took place in 1867 with the culverting of the river Dare between High Street and Duke Street (its early course ran immediately behind the south side of Canon Street and on the line later taken by Boot Lane). Abrupt changes of level in the Gadlys Road area are probably a result of industrial activity here, and serve to create a sharp distinction with other areas of a different character. Building on the steep slopes to the south and west of the town centre required development to adapt to the contours: terraces are stepped to accommodate the slopes, in contrast to the regular terraces on the flat land of Maes y Dre.

The form of development in the town is strongly influenced by patterns of landownership and use, but also by pre-existing features and routeways. Thus the near-circular churchyard of the medieval church constrained development in the historical core of the town, which is shown clearly respecting its boundary on early maps. Several roads pre-date nineteenth-century urban growth, and helped to structure it. Wind Street was shown as an old road on the Bute estate map of 1825: it ran broadly parallel to the Cardiff road, and connected with High Street via a bridge over the river Dare. It may once have been the main route south from Aberdare until it was superceded in importance by the Cardiff road, a new route established for the turnpike (there was once a toll gate at its northern end). The road to Hirwaun was also an earlier route, which provided an axis for settlement (especially the informal development associated with early phases of industrialization), whilst early development on Commercial Street may be explained by its significance as the main route to Merthyr. Monk Street was also in existence by the early nineteenth century.

Later, the arrival of the railway in the Cynon valley may have spurred the further development of Commercial Street along with the newly formed Canon Street, as the central axis of the town. In



Above: Industrial vernacular cottages betray the early origins of Wind Street.

Left: Old and new streets — the curve of Wind Street contrasts with the straight line of Albert Street.

Below: The commercial centre of the town (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).

many areas of the town, the original property boundaries within which development took place can still be clearly traced. Griffith Davies's Foundry Town development occupies two blocks of land between Wind Street and Monk Street, interrupted by two fields belonging to the Bute estate. The boundary between his land and these fields is fossilized in the line of Elizabeth Street, and is clearly visible in the different character of housing to either side of it. Similarly, there are visible distinctions between Bute land to the north-east of Wind Street, and Davies land to its south-west. Street names give another clue to landownership: Cardiff Street, Bute Street, Dumfries Street, and Stuart Street are on Bute land; Griffith Street, Davies Terrace, and Ynysllwyd are on Griffith Davies's land; and Canon Street, Dean Street and Gloucester Street are on Diocese of Gloucester land.

Where blocks of land were big enough, new developments could lay down their own settlement patterns. The Bute estate indulged in planned development on its land to either side of Cardiff Street (between the river Cynon and Wind Street), establishing a grid of streets irrespective of earlier field boundaries. Similarly, the Diocese of Gloucester had a clean canvas for development on Glebe land to the north of the river Dare. Both of these areas are characterized by the regularity of the street grid, and this is also true on a smaller scale of the mid-nineteenth-century developments at Gadlys (perhaps also on Bute estate land).

Patterns of development: Monk Street (bottom) and Elizabeth Street (winding through the middle of this photograph) marked the boundaries of Griffith Davies's land in the mid-nineteenth century. Beyond Elizabeth Street, the wider streets of Bute estate development stand out clearly (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).

Elizabeth Street (the curving line across the middle of this photograph) marks an old field line and ownership boundary, with the streets to either side of it developed at different times and by different people (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).

The Character of Building

'The town is well laid out and in neatness of appearance is far ahead of any other mining town in South Wales'. [7]

Aberdare is sharply divided between the commercial core of the town, and the housing areas immediately adjacent to it. This leads to some abrupt contrasts of scale, even in areas that have undergone a carefully planned development process — for example, to the rear of Canon Street, and at the junction of Victoria Square and Bute Street. Even within the commercial area there are some fine distinctions in the degree of planning and the formality of development, ranging from the large-scale schemes of major landowners to more piecemeal development patterns.

One of the most ambitious exercises in town planning was the Bute estate's development around the mound later occupied by St Elvan's Church. Here, notwithstanding the effects of reconstruction, refurbishment, and differential rates of change, the area remains characterized by large-scale building projects across several plots. Buildings of a similar style also appear elsewhere on Bute land — on Cardiff Street, for example — and were once more common. However, there are also buildings of a similar type on the north side of Canon Street on land laid out for development on behalf of the Diocese of Gloucester, showing that the two estates did not have their own signature styles. Plots were laid out for building leases and development was in the hands of leaseholders, using builders working with considerable uniformity of style.

Commercial Street is much more varied and characterized by smaller units of development, perhaps reflecting its somewhat earlier origins (its present character is the result of piecemeal rebuilding in the later nineteenth century). The south side of Canon Street also exhibits greater variety, with buildings that are notably smaller in scale than those to the north.

Some areas have been subject to successive bouts of redevelopment. The piecemeal pattern

Above: Unified development characterized Bute estate building in Victoria Square.

Left: Large commercial properties are characteristic of the north-west side of Canon Street.

Below: The south-east side of Canon Street developed with smaller properties.

Oriel windows characteristic of the later nineteenth-century redevelopment of Commercial Street.

Below right: Traditional render detail.

Below and bottom: The bold render detail introduced towards the end of the nineteenth century.

of building on the north-east side of Cardiff Street and on Commercial Street resulted in a mix of three-storey buildings, two-storey terraces, and small single buildings. Between about 1880 and 1900, most of the smaller buildings were demolished and rebuilt as three-storey buildings. This phase either repeated the mild Georgian style of earlier building, but with a more expressive vocabulary of detail, or it introduced a mild gothic style, often with oriel windows to upper floors. Parts of Cardiff Street were subsequently redeveloped once or twice more, and a similar fate befell parts of Commercial Street.

The residential areas are dominated by small houses for industrial workers, though the Diocese of Gloucester's development at Maes y Dre included a few short rows of larger houses, characteristically on plots closest to the town centre. Within each area of development there are small variations in house size and general layout, but the distinctions between the areas are greater than those within them. However, the characteristics of each area have been severely eroded in more recent times by piecemeal alteration, and the original unity of design is now difficult to appreciate.

In the commercial areas a Georgian style was favoured, characterized by symmetry and sash windows, and façades were consistently rendered. At first, this seems to have comprised a relatively simple finish with channelled ashlar at ground-floor level, scored ashlar above, and simple moulded architraves around the windows — examples include the south-west end of Canon Street. Between about 1880 and 1900, however, a very clear and distinctive Aberdare style emerged, characterized by exaggerated channelled rustication to the lower storeys, and bold detailing (including oversized quoins), though continuing the more subtle scored ashlar in upper storeys. The Boot Hotel remains an excellent example of this style and photographic evidence shows that it was once more common. There is a rich vocabulary of detail in Aberdare, notwithstanding considerable losses, including vermiculation, rustication, and variations in the treatment of cornices and architraves.

A round of 'improvement' in the last quarter of the twentieth century introduced a standard heritage shop front, but there are many elements of earlier examples surviving and considerable variety

therein. Distinctions in building detail equate to units of development, but even within development units there was some variation — presumably matched to the needs or resources of the early tenants.

In the residential areas, housing is almost invariably terraced (in long blocks wherever the natural topography would allow), and two-storeyed. Important distinctions are to be found in the planning, with some areas favouring a two-unit (double-fronted) long plan, closer to rural vernacular traditions, rather than the two-unit (single-fronted) deep plan adopted elsewhere. The Bute developments to the south made extensive use of the two-unit long plan — for example, the south-west side of Bute Street — and there are even examples of housing built virtually blind backed. Davies's developments however — Foundry Town and Maes y Dre — adopted the deeper planning.

Stone is the ubiquitous building material, but it was rarely left unfinished — at least until the very late nineteenth century when a more expressive style of rustication was adopted. Instead it was almost always rendered, and many houses which now have bare stone walls reveal traces of render or limewash on closer inspection. There are now only a very few examples of original render surviving, but enough to show that there was a wide vocabulary of render styles. There is almost enough to suggest that the detail

Above: Two-unit (double-fronted) long plan on Bute land.

Left: Two-unit (single-fronted) deep plan on Davies land.

Far left: Exposed stonework with brick dressings characteristic of late nineteenth-century housing.

Left: Traces of limewash provide a clue to the original treatment of stone walls.

Right and far right: Bold render detail in Maes y Dre.

Right and below: Rare examples of sash windows.

varied from one area to another — for example, the exaggerated mouldings of the town centre are found in Maes y Dre, but not in Foundry Town.

Virtually all the housing has lost original fenestration, and surviving sash windows are now very rare indeed. Past housing improvement in Aberdare has also consistently removed chimneys and replaced slate with concrete tile. These changes have significantly damaged the historical character and coherence of the residential areas.

Another important characteristic of development within the town is the way in which it reflects the social and economic structure of the industrial community. There is a strong distinction between the tightly defined commercial centre (originally comprising houses over shops), and the residential areas of terraced housing immediately adjacent to it. At first sight, these residential areas display considerable uniformity, but there are subtle distinctions in the size of house from one street to another — for example, between Gloucester Street and Pembroke Street. More obviously, later housing developments introduced a higher standard: housing of about 1900 is characterized by a front garden and bay windows. There are good examples of this in the development to the south-west of Elizabeth Street, in Hawthorne Terrace, and Elm Grove. This is unlikely to be purely a function of rising housing standards, and probably also reflects an increasingly differentiated society. There are notably

Bay windows and small front gardens are characteristic of some late nineteenth-century developments.

Far left: Extravagant render detailing on Hawthorn Terrace.

Left: Distinctive housing on Gadlys Terrace.

few larger houses in Aberdare, but the higher land of Monk Street appears to have provided a more favoured location for middle-class occupancy, offering detached houses in substantial grounds. A very small middle-class suburb could also be found in Clifton Street. Elsewhere, Gadlys Terrace was another favourable location, on rising ground above the old church of St John — here are larger houses, situated in gardens, built to individual designs. Trade directories show a preponderance of gentry and private residents living in these locations.

The larger villas of Clifton Street.

A Way Forward

It is perhaps wishful thinking to imagine that even with the bounty of a Townscape Heritage Initiative, the loss of character in Aberdare could now be reversed. Nevertheless, any Townscape Heritage Initiative in the town should seek to encourage and generously fund the reintroduction of correctly detailed doors and sash windows, based on a meticulous record of the few surviving examples, and the reintroduction of historic finishes, such as renders and limewashes. Though the number of enlightened owners may be few, every one would constitute a plus for the town and be worthy of celebration.

We have seen that there are still characteristics surviving within Aberdare that are important to an understanding of its history and development. These include features such as the distinctive use of differing render detailing and treatments, the varieties of plan form, and, in some areas, the enclosed front gardens with their capped piers and iron railings, the bay windows, and eaves and soffit details of an Italianate character. In some parts of the town, an ongoing and extensive planting of trees and shrubs is characteristic. All of these factors contribute to making Aberdare a mining settlement like no other. These are details which need to be recognized, protected and promoted. This can be achieved by the operation of grant assistance under the Townscape Heritage Initiative, by the formation of policies and protective measures to guide decision-making in planning and development-control processes, and by integration into education and lifelong learning to enhance policies for environmental and cultural awareness.

Character Areas

1. St John's Church, Green Street–High Street Area

Historical Development

St John's Church, the nucleus of the original settlement, is the only pre-industrial building to survive within the area of the town, and includes fabric dating to about 1300. It sits in a conspicuously large churchyard that was even larger before it was truncated by redevelopment in the twentieth century. Map evidence shows that this was the location of the pre-industrial village, and photographic evidence confirms the existence of earlier buildings in this area. Early development seems to have been concentrated to either side of the line of High Street, around the eastern edge of the churchyard. However, road widening and redevelopment in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have removed any tangible evidence for early building in this area. Map evidence suggests that settlement in this area also expanded during the nineteenth century, especially in the Green Street area and on the east of High Street. The erection of chapels in this area in 1855 and 1859 relate closely to the principal period of urban growth in Aberdare. Until the formation of Canon Street in 1854, High Street formed part of the principal axis of the town; the first market hall was sited here in 1831, which was in turn converted into the town hall when the new market was built in 1853.

Present Character

Clearance in the twentieth century has left only the principal buildings — the church and the chapels — standing in the Green Street area, whilst redevelopment has contributed the library, a good modern work of 1962–63, and the Crown building of 1974. Along High Street, losses of earlier buildings (for example, those which once ringed the churchyard, as well as Ty Mawr and The Poplars superceded by the health centre) and the replacement of others have brought into prominence the larger urban buildings such as the town hall and The Constitutional Club. The Constitutional Club represents a redevelopment of

Nos 42–43 High Street.

1894 and comprises a flamboyant three-storey block flanked by two-storey buildings, including purpose-built shops, all built as a single development. Its emphatic detail is characteristic of building work in Aberdare during this period. Nos 42–43 High Street is another important survival and a reminder of the early status of the street: the cast-iron columns of its porch highlight the importance of iron in the development of the town.

2. Commercial and Civic Core

The main commercial centre comprises Canon Street, Commercial Street, Cardiff Street, and Victoria Square (formerly Commercial Place) — in other words, the area that encircles the mound on which St Elvan's Church sits — with Cardiff Street providing the main entry point into the town from the south. Large commercial buildings face the main thoroughfares which are distinguishable from the residential streets which begin immediately beyond. Chapels and institutions are concentrated in this area, especially on Wind Street and Monk Street. Variations in character within the area reflect the different origins of its component parts.

Large commercial buildings on Canon Street, and the Burton's shop front cut into the earlier Queen's Hotel.

Bold render detail on Canon Street.

Buildings of varied size characterize the south-east side of Canon Street.

Simple render detail on Canon Street.

2.1 Canon Street

Historical Development

Canon Street represents a formal development on land owned by the Diocese of Gloucester and laid out for building in about 1854. The line of the river Dare, before it was culverted in 1867, originally lay to the rear of the building line on the south side of the street. The character of building suggests that plots were laid out in a single campaign, but building work undertaken by numerous individuals working on units of varying size and ambition. This is confirmed by a map of the estate of around 1855, recording the names of leaseholders against individual plots of varying size. The area also exhibits some of the characteristics of a rapidly growing urban economy, with sequences of change and some rebuilding. Most eloquent perhaps is the former Queen's Hotel, first re-rendered in the later nineteenth century with the Aberdare fashion for exaggerated detailing, and then extensively remodelled as Burtons in about 1930, with the insertion of a two-storey shop front into a mid-nineteenth-century building.

Present Character

The north side of the street is dominated by large public buildings: The Constitutional Club on High Street at its west end, Trinity Presbyterian Church on Weatheral Street (dating to 1867, but remodelled in 1894), and Temperance Hall (built by 1868). The rest of this side of the street comprises large units of development in a series of three-storey blocks, probably in commercial use from the outset. Characteristic of ambitious urban development are the suave corner blocks. See, for example, no. 9 (Burtons, formerly The Queen's Hotel), where there is little surviving detail (apart from some two and four-pane sashes), but some very striking rustication — the exaggerated rendered moulding — introducing a distinctive feature of building in the town. Another example of this suavity is the bank block between Whitcomb Street and Commercial Street, a substantial building of seven bays, perhaps comprising a bank and a house.

The south side of Canon Street is rather different, comprising generally smaller-scale buildings in identifiable units of varied size. The smaller size of building perhaps reflects a less-favoured location, with the river Dare originally running close to the

rear of the buildings. Although much of the detail has been renewed, some original features do remain: early shop fronts, sash windows, and examples of early render with simple mouldings to window architraves. Enough detail survives to show that whilst the basic form of development seems to have been set out, there was considerable scope for variety within the building process — apparent even in the type of moulding used for window architraves.

There is also a distinction between the east and west ends of the street. Towards the east, closest to the town centre, development is mainly on single or double plots, with some three-storey buildings, and a more ornate code of detail (for example, Dales, which has canted bays over the shop front). Towards High Street, to the west, the units of development are longer, but the buildings themselves are generally smaller. This is a good indication that away from the commercial core of the town, there was less pressure to develop.

2.2 Victoria Street and Victoria Square

Historical Development

This area was formerly known as Commercial Place, and was developed on Bute estate land. The Bute estate map shows the formal laying out of property on the north and north-east sides of the square (the south and east sides of the mound on which St Elvan's Church sits) in 1824. The tithe map of 1844 records this pattern of development as built, but most surviving buildings are likely to represent a second generation of building on this site in the mid- to late nineteenth century. Both maps imply that the original development was intended to be residential: the plots were set out with gardens to the front and the rear and the estate map indicated a row of cowsheds in what was later the Market Street area. It is possible that Nos 1 and 2 Victoria Square are the sole representatives of the original scheme, set back from the dominant building line.

Present Character

The development still has some unity of style, notwithstanding piecemeal renovation schemes, with further examples of the urbane three-storey blocks similar to those of Canon Street's north side: Barclays, The Beehive, and Compton House.

The south side of Victoria Square displays a more varied development pattern, including some substantial urban blocks (for example, The Bute Arms), but juxtaposed with much smaller buildings. This was also Bute land, but perhaps not so systematically developed. The east side of the square (Market Street to Boot Lane) also belonged to the Bute estate and was developed in much the same way, with some large blocks, including The Boot Hotel, providing an excellent example of the bold rendering fashionable in the late nineteenth century. The Black Lion Hotel looks down on the square on its junction with Wind Street (the early road into Aberdare from the south). Its small pane sashes and pilasters may be an indication that the hotel was built in the early nineteenth century.

Above: The Black Lion forms part of the commercial development of the town centre, whilst immediately beyond it, small industrial vernacular cottages follow the old line of Wind Street.

Left: Nos 1 and 2 Victoria Square may represent the original building line for Bute development here.

Below: Formal development on a relatively large scale is characteristic of Bute estate development in Victoria Square.

2.3 Cardiff Street and Market Street

Historical Development

Cardiff Street lay on Bute land, and was probably established as a new turnpike route into the town, superceding the old road of Wind Street. The street had not been built up on the 1825 estate map, but by 1844 the street had been developed on both sides as far as Cross Street, and beyond it on the west. Early photographs show mixed development, including one tiny building on the site of nos 56–57, and modest terraces of two-storey buildings (subsequently rebuilt with three storeys) on the north-east side of the street. The absence of unity suggests that the estate was not tightly controlling the detailed development process in this area, but the hand of the estate was certainly suggested in a series of large three-storey buildings — Cardiff Castle Hotel, The Red Lion, and an elegant crescent. The influence of the estate is less discernible in surviving buildings, following considerable redevelopment in the nineteenth century.

The market was built in 1853, in a development that included not only the market hall itself, but also slaughterhouses in a row opposite, reconstructed in 1903 and adapted in more recent times when converted to shops. The original development signals another major investment in the civic ambitions of Aberdare as it rose to prominence in the mid-nineteenth century.

Present Character

The area retains some distinctive three-storey blocks and individual commercial buildings (e.g. HSBC bank), but there has been much later twentieth-century renewal. The three-storey blocks have suffered extensive renewal of detail, but traces of original character still remain: the upper storeys of No. 1 Cardiff Street retain early render with quoins.

2.4 Commercial Street

Historical Development

Commercial Street appears to have marked a division between Bute land to the south and land owned by the Diocese of Gloucester to the north. Development of the street preceded that of Canon Street. The road was established as the route to Merthyr in the early nineteenth century, and it may have had some early importance. The tithe map marks a continuous building line to the north of the street, and sporadic development to the south. Its development as a commercial street however, has been dated to the years immediately following the arrival of the railway, around 1847 to 1851, and its present architectural character is largely of the mid- to late nineteenth century. Early photographs suggest piecemeal development, comprising some substantial three-storey buildings, some of which were residential, alongside others

Some nineteenth-century detail survived extensive redevelopment on Cardiff Street.

which were much smaller. Later redevelopment, which began at the end of the nineteenth century and continued with successive phases into the twentieth century, has imposed a more unified and completely commercial character.

Present Character

Unlike Canon Street and Victoria Square, Commercial Street is characterized by short blocks, mainly, but not exclusively, in the Georgian style. The street includes some excellent examples of commercial architecture: the building occupied by Dorothy Perkins has a touch of the gothic and is a good example of Aberdare render, with rustication, vermiculation and good surviving detail. The Bush Inn offers another example of surviving render work, with its vermiculation, rustication, and pilasters. Superdrug is an exceptionally good shop development, with a curved angle and a good shop front of about 1850.

Unusual gothic detail in a late nineteenth-century building on Commercial Street.

Well-preserved detail on Commercial Street.

3. Maes y Dre

Historical Development

Maes y Dre was former glebe land in the ownership of the Diocese of Gloucester and laid out for development in 1854. The development was clearly planned, and comprises a grid of streets with the perimeter constrained by the old High Street to the west, the Taff Vale Railway to the east, and a meandering watercourse to the north (later obliterated by the line of railways from Gadlys pit and beyond). A map of the area in 1855 shows the street layout and parcels of building land of variable size, recorded with the names of the leaseholders. It shows that building work had already commenced at the east end of Seymour Street, and sporadically elsewhere.

Distinctive large terraced houses in Maes y Dre.

Present Character

Closest to the town centre, Whitcomb Street begins with some interesting residential development: a three-storey terrace on the west side with Renaissance detail, and a lower three-storey terraced row opposite, including Glosters Arms with big overhanging eaves. Weatheral Street also begins with a small row of stylish larger houses with bay windows, but these represent development later in the

Right: Rare examples of the varied decorative finishes once applied to housing in Maes y Dre.

nineteenth century. With these exceptions, the area has a strongly unified character, comprising long two-storey terraces generally of a standard single-fronted deep plan. Variations in detail between the terraces probably reflect the fact that many leaseholders were involved in the development of the area. There are some arched entries giving rear access, possibly for vehicles, suggesting that there may have been workshops associated with some of the houses originally.

Very little detail survives: chimneys, roof coverings, and wall finishes have mainly been lost or renewed, and there are no original windows. There are some examples of exposed stonework, including stonework that may never have been rendered, and scarce examples of original render, including scored ashlar and some fine moulded detail. No. 37 Whitcombe Street provides a good example of scored ashlar render, pilasters and architraves. The Whitcombe Inn and its neighbor have interesting rendered detail, including rusticated render at ground-floor level, and there are other examples on Weatheral Street. There is some local variation in the size of house: the terraces of Gloucester Street are lower and have a shallower roof pitch than those of Weatherall Street and the various cross streets. The streets are mainly continuously built up, but some undeveloped back plots have boundary walls of unfinished stone — for example, on Dean Street and Gloucester Street.

Distinctive render detail on the Whitcombe Inn.

4. Foundry Town

Historical Development

The area was developed on land in the ownership of the Bute estate, and on Ynysllwyd farmland belonging to Griffith Davies; the two ownerships are still reflected to some extent in the character of building. Wind Street was the early through route, pre-dating Cardiff Street which was established as the turnpike road in the early nineteenth century. As the earliest road, development along Wind Street is characteristically irregular, with short blocks and considerable variations in scale: from some very small single-unit cottages to gentry houses such as Bryn Golwg and The Mardy, with its lodges and high boundary wall. Sporadic development is shown on Wind Street in 1844. Development close to the town centre also began in the earlier nineteenth century: housing is shown on the north-west side of Bute Street on the tithe map. One terrace of this phase survives with a vernacular double-fronted long plan.

Present Character

Foundry Town is a substantial residential area almost exclusively comprising terraced industrial workers' housing. The natural topography imparts a distinctive character to the whole area, with steep slopes requiring a stepping of rows.

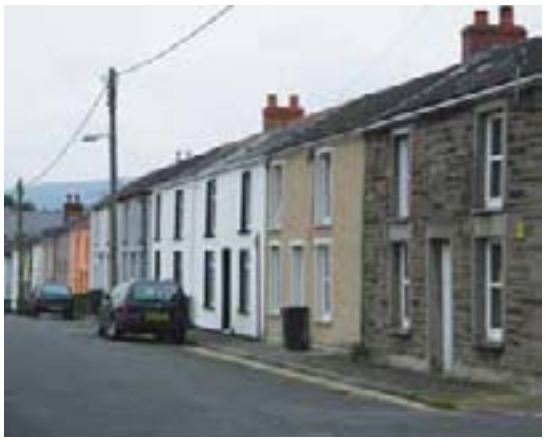
Development on Bute estate land is characterized by relatively wide streets (Bute Street, Dumfries Street, and Albert Street), whereas on Davies land the streets are slightly narrower (Upper Regent Street and Bond Street). On Bute land, the house plan commonly adopted was a double-fronted long plan, closer to a rural vernacular house type, and there are some instances of houses built with virtually blind backs (e.g. at the north-west end of Dumfries Street). There are small variations in scale, but most houses have this plan form. Towards the east end of Bute Street, a single-fronted deep plan was introduced, possibly relating to phasing of development. On Davies land, this plan predominates.

Very little original detail survives, but there are some examples of exposed stone retaining traces of original limewash or render. Some early street furniture survives in the form of cast-iron street signs, and these should be preserved.

The largest block of Davies land (bounded by Wind Street, Monk Street and Elizabeth Street) was

Above: The curved line of Elizabeth Street respecting an old field boundary contrasts with the straight lines of new streets laid out in the mid-nineteenth century (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).

Left: Early nineteenth-century housing surviving on Bute Street.



Left: Wide streets and two-unit long plan houses are typical of development on Bute estate land.

Below left: Irregular rows of two-unit deep plan houses are typical of development on Davies land.

Below: Cast-iron street signs are a distinctive feature of the town.

Above: Slag from the ironworks forms a distinctive coping for garden walls.

Above right: A house with a distinctive splayed angle on Davies land.

Right: The line of Elizabeth Street fossilizes an old field boundary.

formerly laid out as a unified development around the spine of Ynysllwyd Street, and all junctions are marked with splayed angles. Within this overall structure, there is some variation in the type and size of house. For example, development on Jenkin Street appears slightly piecemeal and includes small single-fronted terraces (mainly exposed stone but showing traces of limewash), a single house with a front garden, a terrace set back from the street line (rock-faced with overhanging eaves), as well as some lower rows.

The houses seem to have been simply detailed, probably originally with small pane sash windows and plain limewash or render finishes. By contrast, houses on Hawthorn Terrace have extravagant render detail on one side, bay windows and front gardens. They are a somewhat later development (by 1900), and were of a higher status.

Elizabeth Street marked the boundary between Davies land and Bute land, and was the outer limit of urban development until the late nineteenth century. The land between Elizabeth Street and The Grove was generously laid out in a regular development of parallel rows with back lanes (the walls of the lanes contain ironworking slag). Houses are larger than the earlier developments and there are some interesting plan forms and small variations in status — for example, some rows have bay windows. They are built using rock-faced stonework with yellow brick dressings (some now painted), and roofs here are raked rather than stepped to follow the slope.

An unusual plan form in late nineteenth-century housing with an extra window on each floor.

5. Gadlys

Historical Development

Gadlys does not have a single coherent identity, but displays varied characteristics relating to several different patterns of growth, and perhaps different owners. At the time of the tithe survey, George Rowland Morgan owned land to the north-west of the town and was perhaps responsible for the development of the small area around Gadlys Terrace (including Morgan Street). North-west of Gadlys Road, the unified character of development suggests the hand of the Bute estate.

The area includes the sites of Gadlys Ironworks to the north-east and Gadlys Pit to the south-west, and contains some of the earliest housing to survive in Aberdare, relating to the first phase of industrialization. Generally however, development, as elsewhere in the town, dates overwhelmingly to the mid- to late nineteenth century. In this area, the line of Gadlys Road and the boundary of Hirwaun Common to the north (which became Aberdare Park following enclosure of the common in 1869) were pre-existing linear features which provided an axis for relatively informal development. Another linear feature which helped constrain the form of settlement was the railway from Gadlys Pit, the line of which became East Avenue.

More formal planned development took place around these features, but in relatively small blocks of land and over several decades, beginning in the 1850s–60s. Changing building styles within these blocks reflect the chronology of building. Gadlys Street, for example, pre-dates Oxford Street: there is a shift from render to stone in the years that separate them. After the demise of the Gadlys Ironworks and the closure of the railway line serving it (the bridge over Gadlys Road was demolished in 1912), the area around it was redeveloped and new housing built in the early twentieth century.

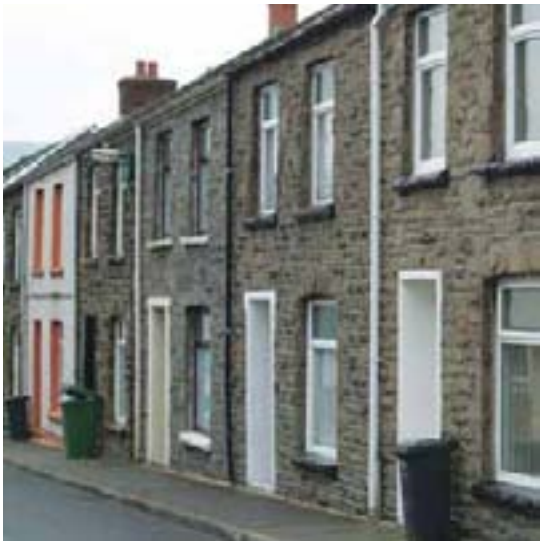
Present Character

The low area between Gadlys Terrace and the church of St John is close to the original centre of settlement, but it is also closest to the ironworks and colliery. The earliest buildings here probably pre-date the formalized urban development of Foundry Town and Maes y Dre and belong to an early phase of industrialization in the area, probably associated with the Gadlys Ironworks of 1827. Short terraces, with no overall plan and often built alongside existing road or tramway lines, characterize this early phase. Examples include a low terrace of three two-unit long plan cottages with small windows, and a three-storey row, both on Gadlys Road (the former terrace retains the encapsulated gable of an earlier cottage and also traces of limewash on exposed stone). Other examples are the terrace on Dover Place and the terrace on East Avenue (relating to the former line of the railway from Gadlys Pit). The latter has the characteristic low storey height and shallow roof pitch associated with earlier building, but has been much altered.

More formalized planned development probably followed this in the 1850s and 1860s, but was constrained by existing boundaries and features. The small development of Morgan Street and Gadlys Terrace was constrained to the west and the south by the railways from Gadlys Pit. Likewise Dowlais Street and Oxford Street respect a large open area to the south (possibly under different ownership) and the open ground (Aberdare Park) to the north. Within these constraints, a formality

Gadlys Street and Oxford Street form a discrete development with its own character (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).

Right and below right: Wide streets of two-unit deep plan houses characterize the Gadlys Street and Oxford Street development.



of layout was achieved, especially in the Gadlys Street and Oxford Street development, where long rows were linked by a narrow cross-route and separated by back lanes, and the streets are notably wide.

There is local variation between these streets: in plan form (single-fronted deep or double-fronted long), size (the houses on Gadlys Street are notably smaller), and in finish (rock-faced stone is used in the later houses on Oxford Street rather than render or limewash which is employed elsewhere). Virtually all original detail has been lost, including roof covering and chimneys. Very little original render has survived,

Right and far right: Rare examples of traditional render finishes.

Larger houses with elaborate detail on Gadlys Terrace.

and the few decorative finishes which remain intact should be treasured. The Beehive public house on Dowlais Street retains a sense of original character, with its (renewed) public house window and a large portico porch with cast-iron columns.

Morgan Street, built by 1868, represents a much smaller development and was probably envisaged as a single scheme comprising terraces that were stepped to accommodate the slope, but with variation in the type and size of house (variously single-fronted deep, or double-fronted long plans), and in the finish used. Here, some examples of original render (with traces of lining out) and decorative architraves survive.

On Gadlys Terrace, the houses date to the mid-nineteenth century (by 1868) and have some pretensions: front gardens with gate piers and railings, architectural elaboration with some Italianate detail, elaborate render work, and decorative bargeboards.

Maelgwyn Terrace and Lambert Terrace are a later development, built between 1900 and 1920, following the closure of Gadlys Pit. They have features characteristic of later development, including broad windows with brick architraves, and rock-faced stonework bearing traces of original skim-render.

Paired villas with front gardens on Elm Grove.

Ann Street and Wayne Street form a single development of about 1860, comprising tall single-fronted deep plan houses, originally limewashed or rendered, but now displaying mainly exposed stone or modern finishes. Gospel Hall Terrace and Neville Terrace are larger and later, built after 1900. These houses are double-fronted with some rustic stone and brick architraves, but their original finish has largely been lost to pebble-dash.

Tudor Terrace, a later build of 1900 boasting bay windows and roofed porches, is now heavily altered. Elm Grove is later in date again, built after the closure of the ironworks — furnace-waste brick was used in the garden wall

The piecemeal building pattern of Glan Road.

Below: Gadlys Chapel, Railway Street.

of the end house — as higher status, middle-class housing. The houses comprise a series of pairs all to one design, with full-height bays, terracotta cresting, and red-brick walls to front gardens. No original finish or detail survives, except for a few chimneys.

Through routes were less amenable to coherent planning, and the units of development were characteristically smaller and more varied. This is true on Glan Road, where the pattern of development is piecemeal, reflecting multiple ownership and absence of planning. Building appears to be mainly mid- to late nineteenth century in date, as the development is not indicated on the tithe map of 1844. There is great variety in the length of terrace and size of house, and also in the style and finish. However, render predominated, and some decorative architraves have survived.

Gadlys Road has a mix of sizes and types of development coalescing as an amalgamated terrace, including some commercial buildings — for example, The White Lion public house of about 1850. There are also some grand Edwardian buildings including a shop, the former Bracchi's, and a hall/cinema with a white glazed front. One terrace is dated 'Perseverance, 1866', but retains very little detail.

Hirwaun Road marks an early boundary, skirting the common which formerly ran up

to the Old Hirwaun Road. Although nothing is shown here on the tithe survey, the terrace of four cottages on Hirwaun Road retain a vernacular character similar to early nineteenth-century buildings elsewhere in Gadlys, with their low two-unit long plan, and simple, squared stone with traces of limewash. As if to underscore the informality of settlement along these routes and boundaries, one pair of cottages face away from the road. The chapel beyond is dated to 1864.

6. Monk Street

Historical Development

The line of Monk Street was in existence at the beginning of the nineteenth century as a route over the mountain to the Rhondda valley. However, with the possible exception of the area closest to the town centre, development along its line does not appear to have begun until the mid-nineteenth century. Like other route lines, this development was piecemeal and built in relatively small units of pairs and short terraces (excepting the development which formed part of Griffith Davies's Foundry Town of the 1860s). Rising above the town, Monk Street offered favourable territory for Aberdare's small middle-class: as the street ascends, the character of building changes from terraces to pairs of larger houses with front gardens.

Beyond the north-west side of the street, development took a varied character: a series of detached houses in grounds, and streets of terraced houses. This suggests that responsibility for building lay in the hands of several owners, each making individual decisions about what kind of development to promote.

Present Character

The various themes outlined above are still well illustrated in the surviving building stock. Towards the top of the street, housing is generally later nineteenth century in date, and larger: Craig Isaf, for example, is an unusual Edwardian development of brick and pebble-dash. There are also some large detached houses: Dan y Graig House (about 1850–60), Cae Coed (about 1870), and Fairfield House (about 1870). Below this the street is characterized by short terraces. A good example has rusticated gate piers with cast-iron caps, with the inscription 'Aberdare 1876 W Williams Maker, Glancynon Foundry'. Pendarren Street is a late nineteenth-century terrace of painted brickwork, and Frondeg Terrace has rustic stone and gothic detail including Caernarfon arches to doors.

Clifton Street, built after 1868, is a small middle-class enclave of larger houses comprising a series of detached villas or pairs, with considerable variety of detail. Notwithstanding some losses, surviving detail is of a high quality: sash windows, architraves, panelled reveals to doorways, and bargeboards. The area would warrant measures to protect this precious surviving detail, and perhaps should become a small conservation area.

Left: Villas with good decorative detail on Clifton Street.

Below: Larger houses on Monk Street.

Statement of Significance

Aberdare enjoyed a meteoric rise from a small village to a full-blown town over the course of a few decades in the mid-nineteenth century. This rapid growth was fuelled by the iron industry and coalmining and when they came to an end, they left behind a remarkably complete industrial town.

The town's expansion occurred in a series of coherent building campaigns, from the centre outwards. At its heart, the commercial and institutional core was established by the mid-nineteenth century; waves of subsequent remodelling and redevelopment were all contained within a strong and distinctive topographical framework. There is an abrupt distinction between the centre of the town and its residential areas. Most of these areas were laid out as planned developments. The extent to which their shape was determined by an inherited structure of landownership and use is still apparent to a remarkable degree in the street pattern as well as in sharp changes in the character of building from area to area. This strong historical topography is one of Aberdare's strongest characteristics, and has proved stubbornly resistant to change.

Each area had a dominant style of building. Variations in plan and layout, and even in the use of materials, are an important testimony to the distinctive development histories of the various parts of the town. However, the architectural character associated with different phases and types of development has fared badly in recent decades, and further erosion of this diversity should be avoided. But despite the damage inflicted by piecemeal 'improvement' work, scattered throughout the town are many examples of highly distinctive detailing. If the pattern of streets is one of the keys to understanding the history and development of the town, this vocabulary of detail is another: it adds up to a unique Aberdare style, which should be carefully preserved and vigorously promoted.

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1 The Extent of Settlement as Depicted on the Tithe Map, 1844
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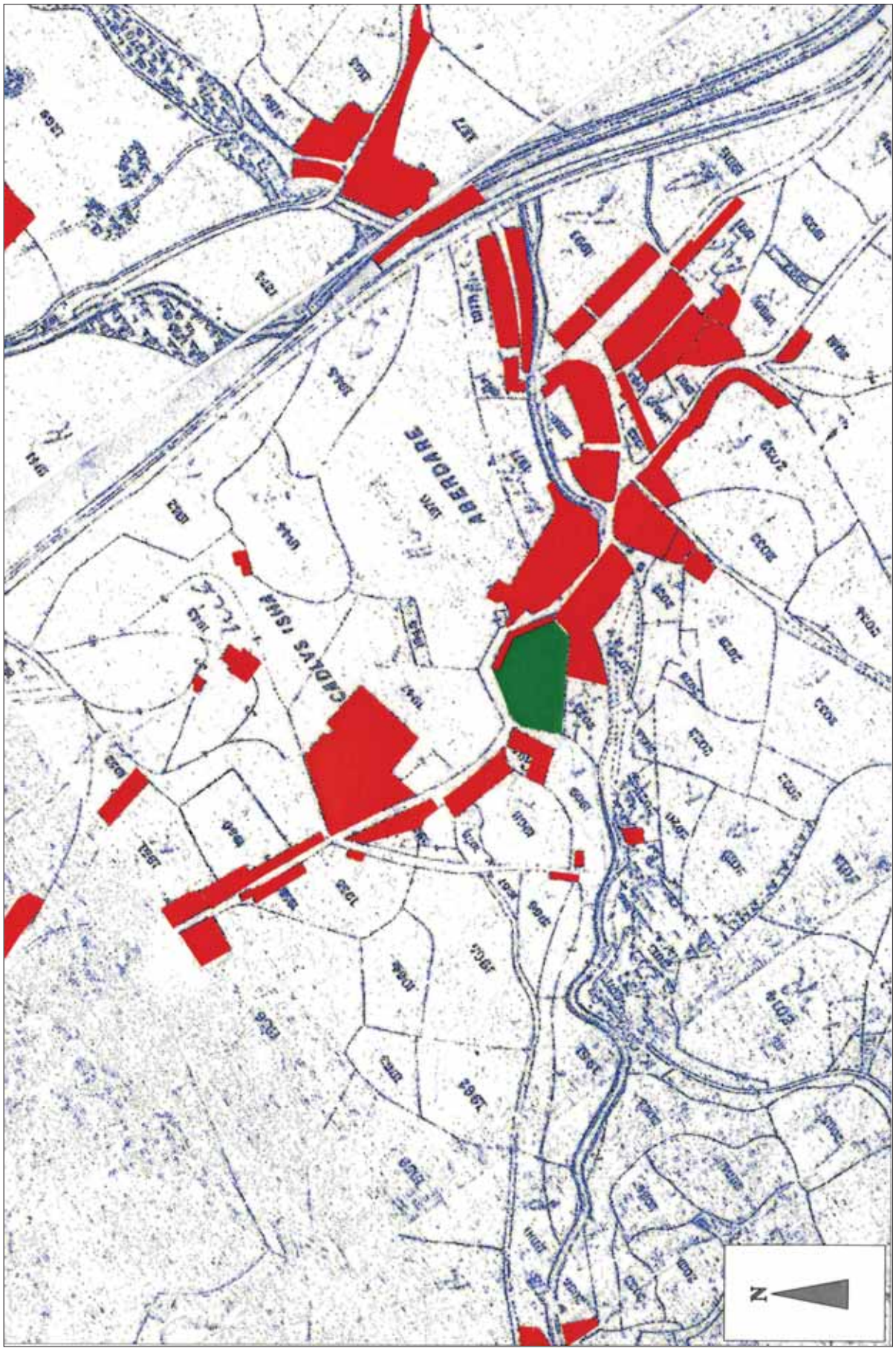

2 The Extent of Settlement as Depicted on the First Edition Ordnance Survey Map, 1868–90

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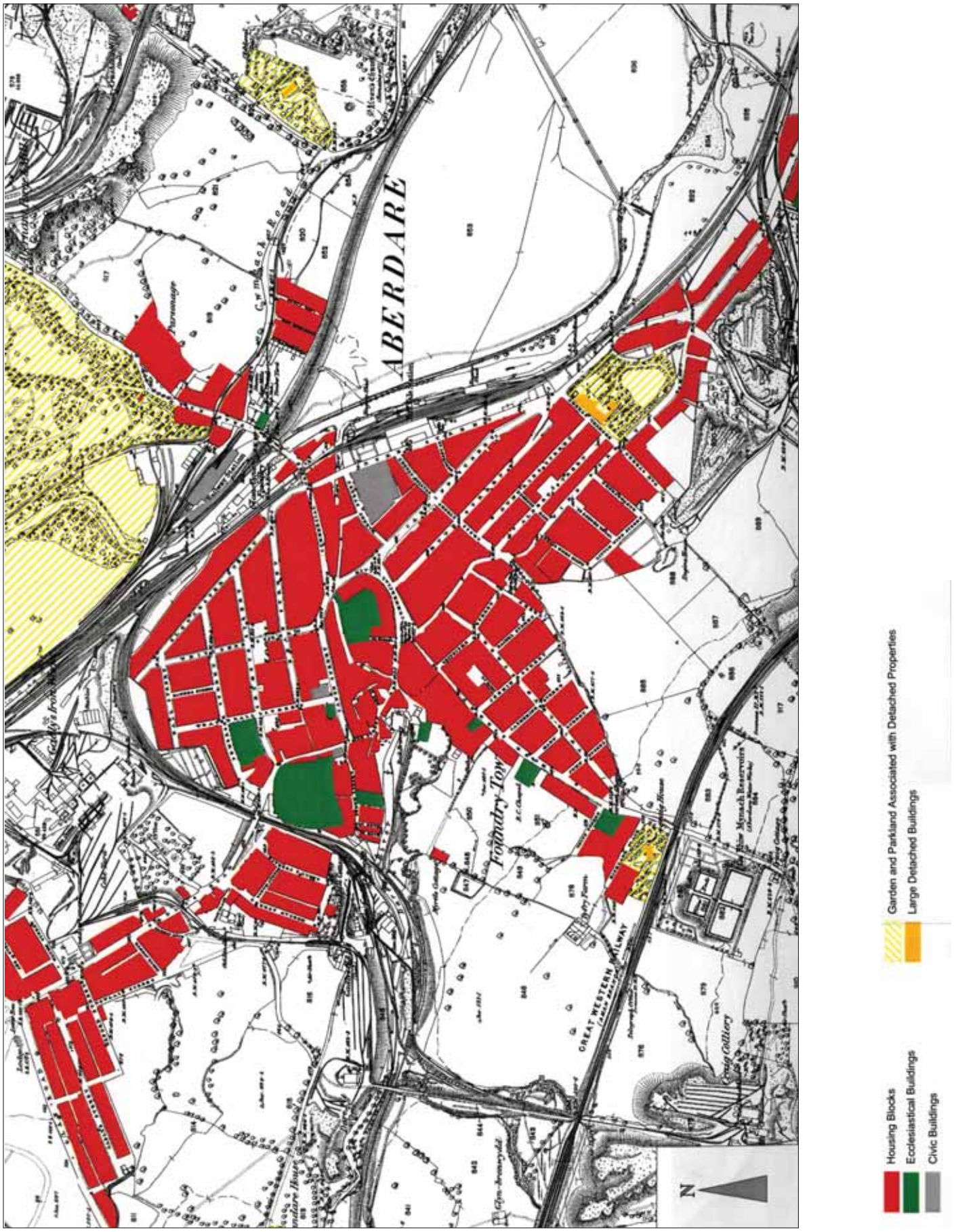

3 The Extent of Settlement as Depicted in the Second Edition Ordnance Survey Map, 1900

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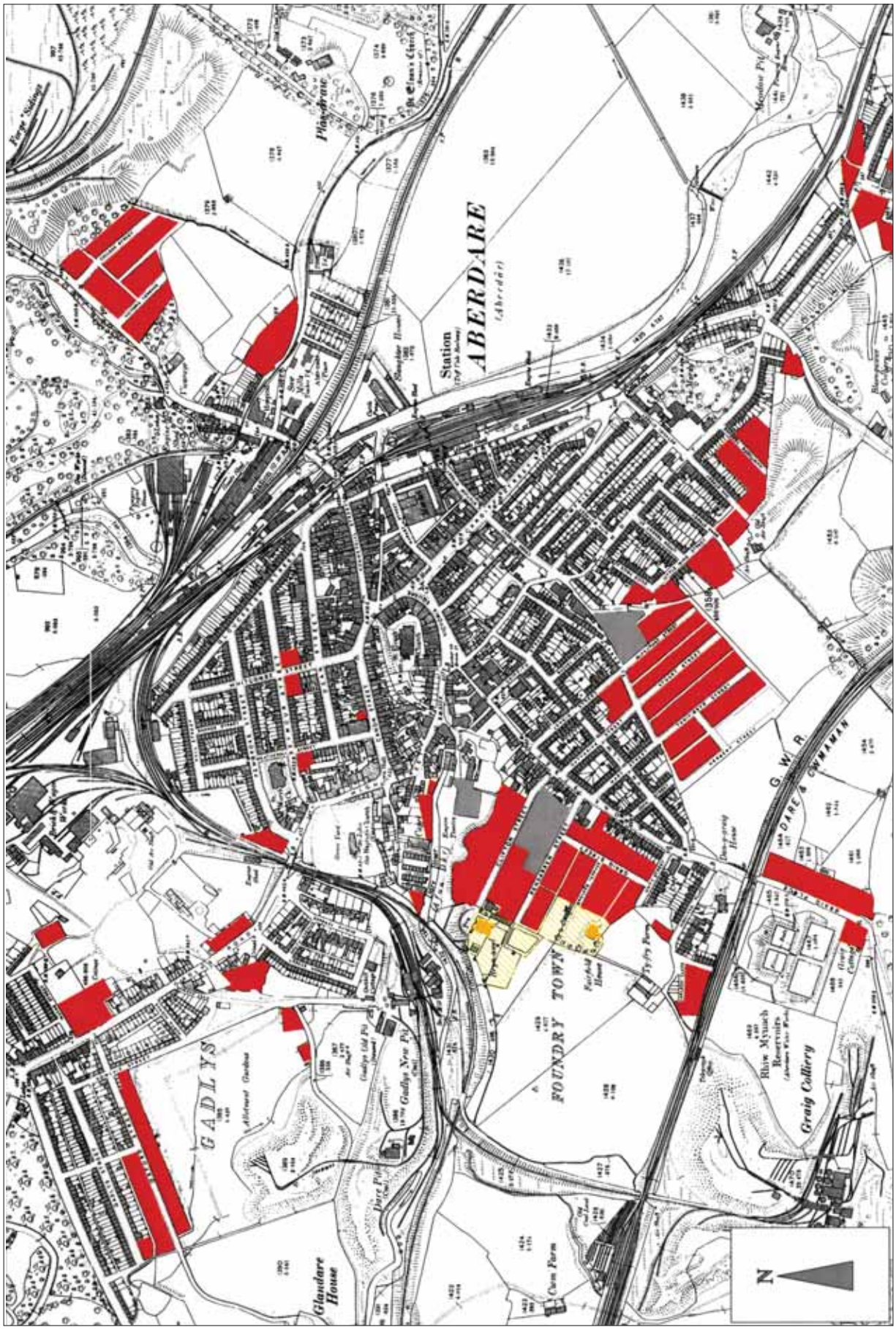
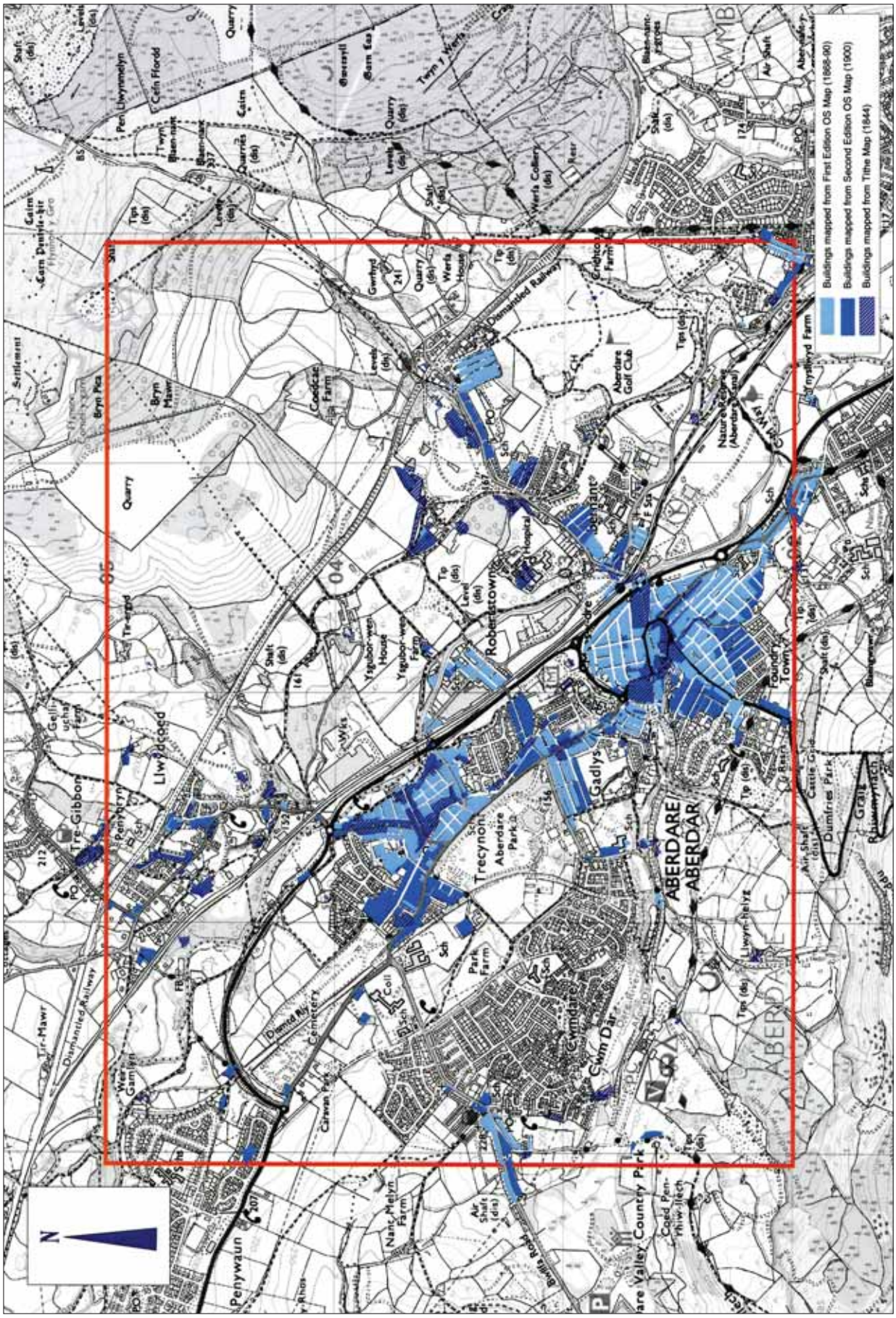


4 The Phases of Historical Development



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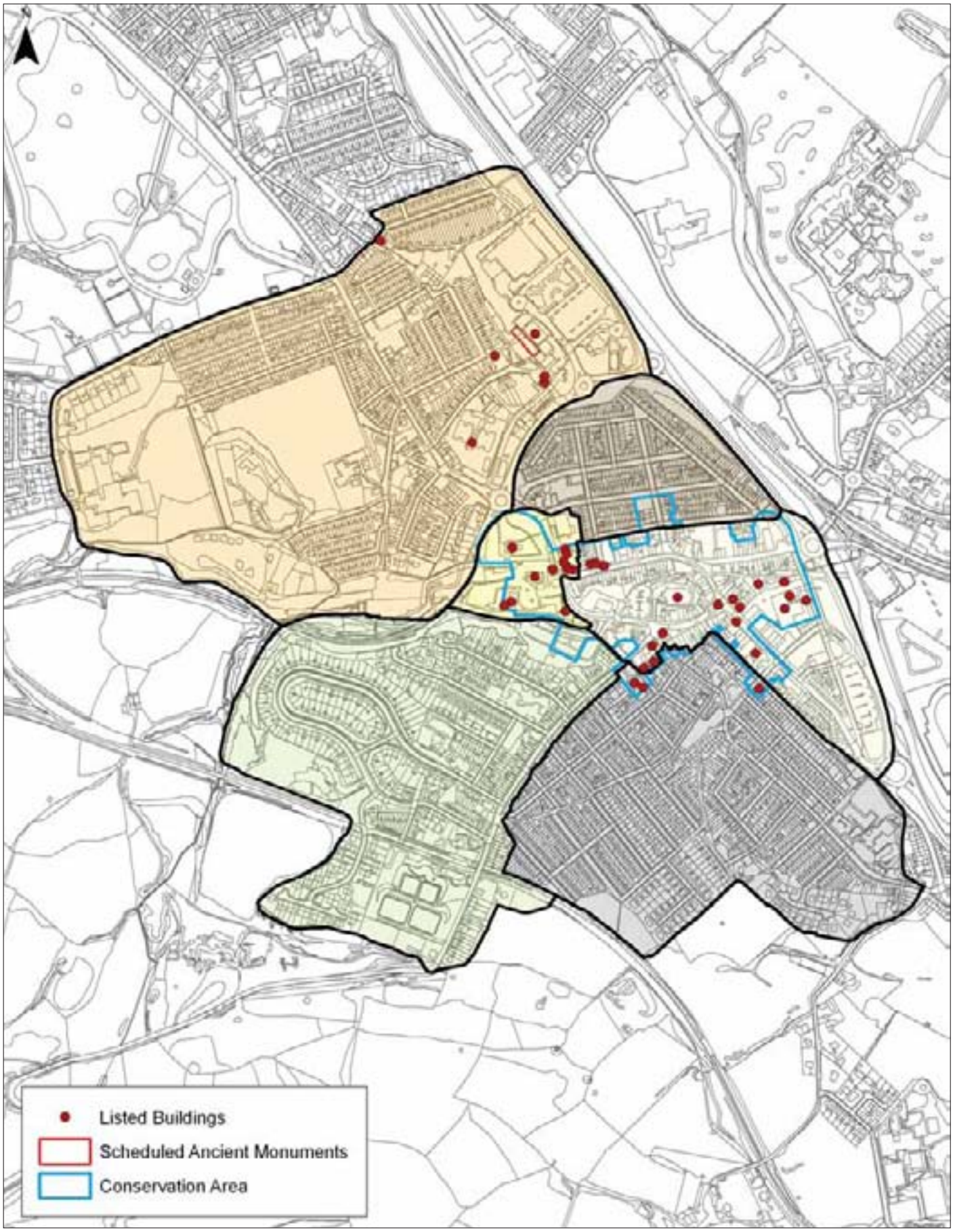
5 Study Area showing Historic Environment Designations



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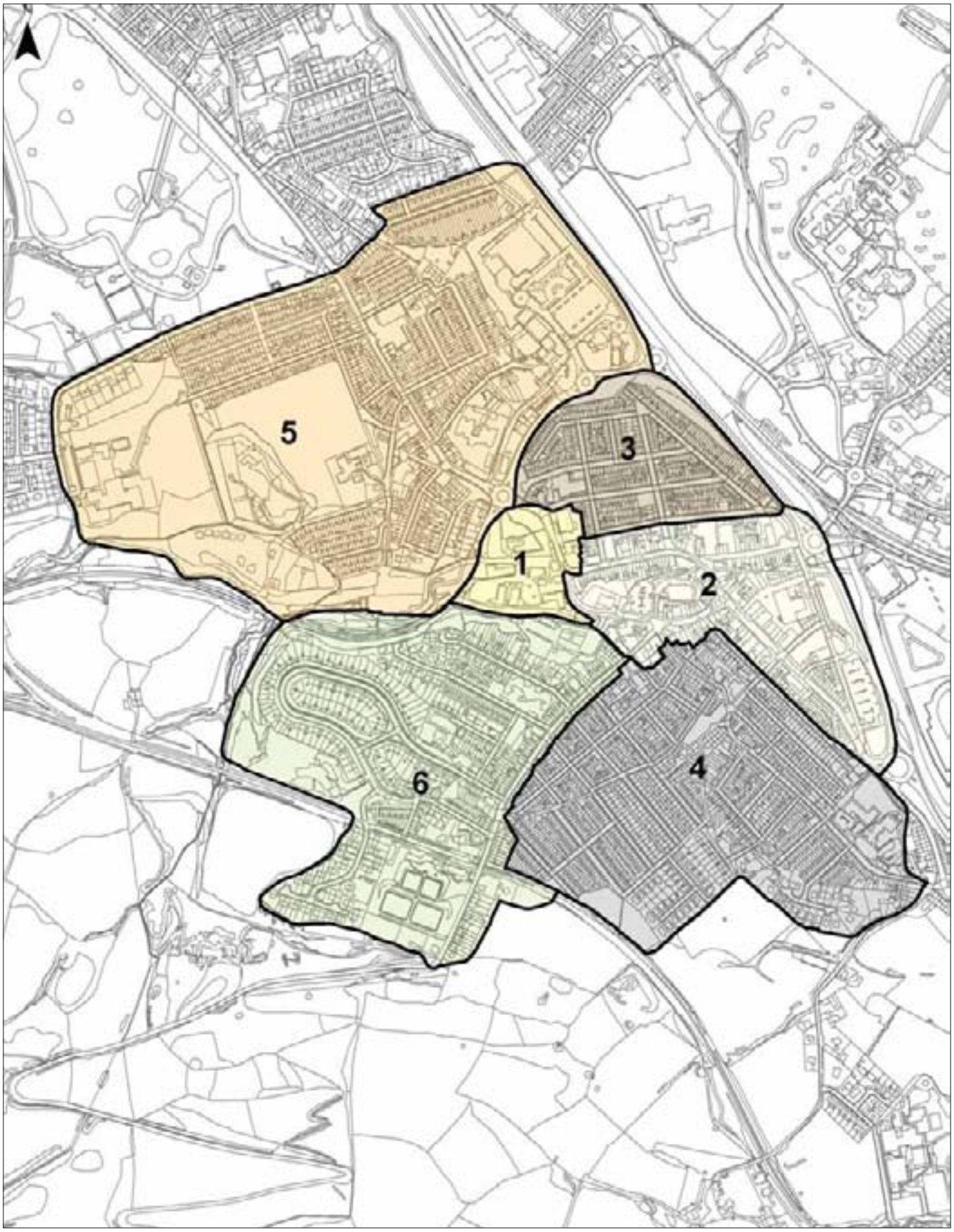
6 All Character Areas



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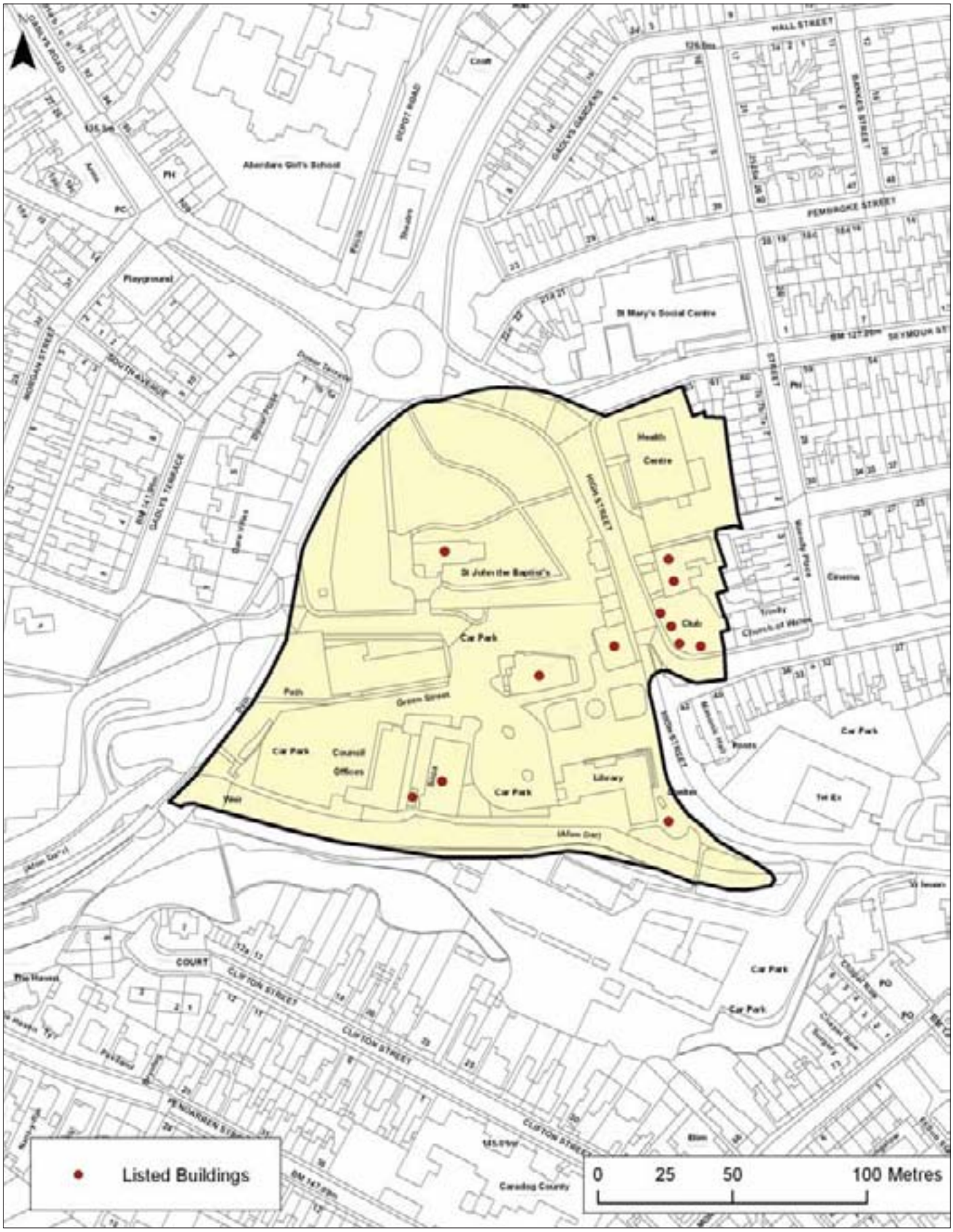
7 St John's Church, Green Street and High Street (1)



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8 Commercial and Civic Core (2)

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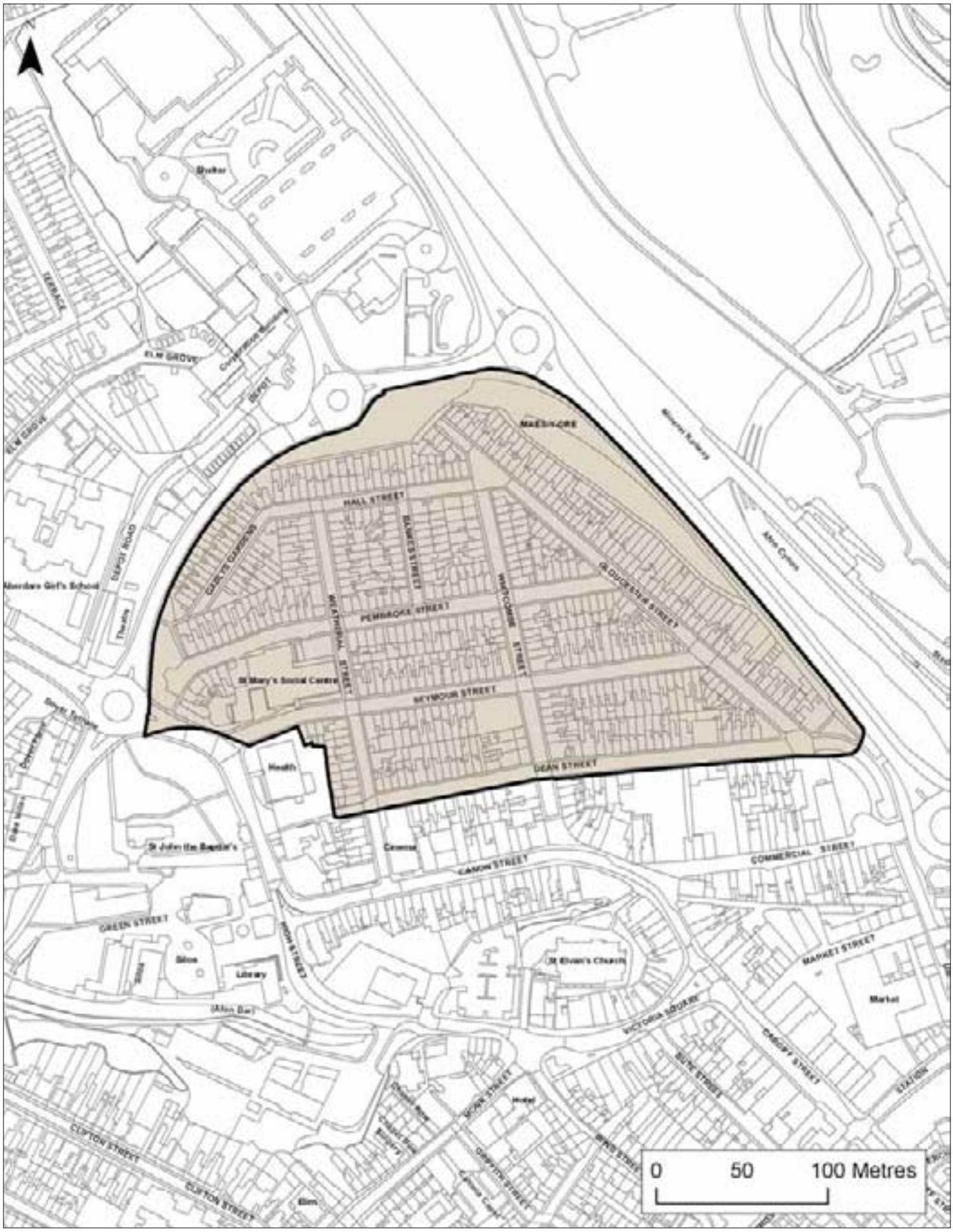
9 Maes y Dre (3)



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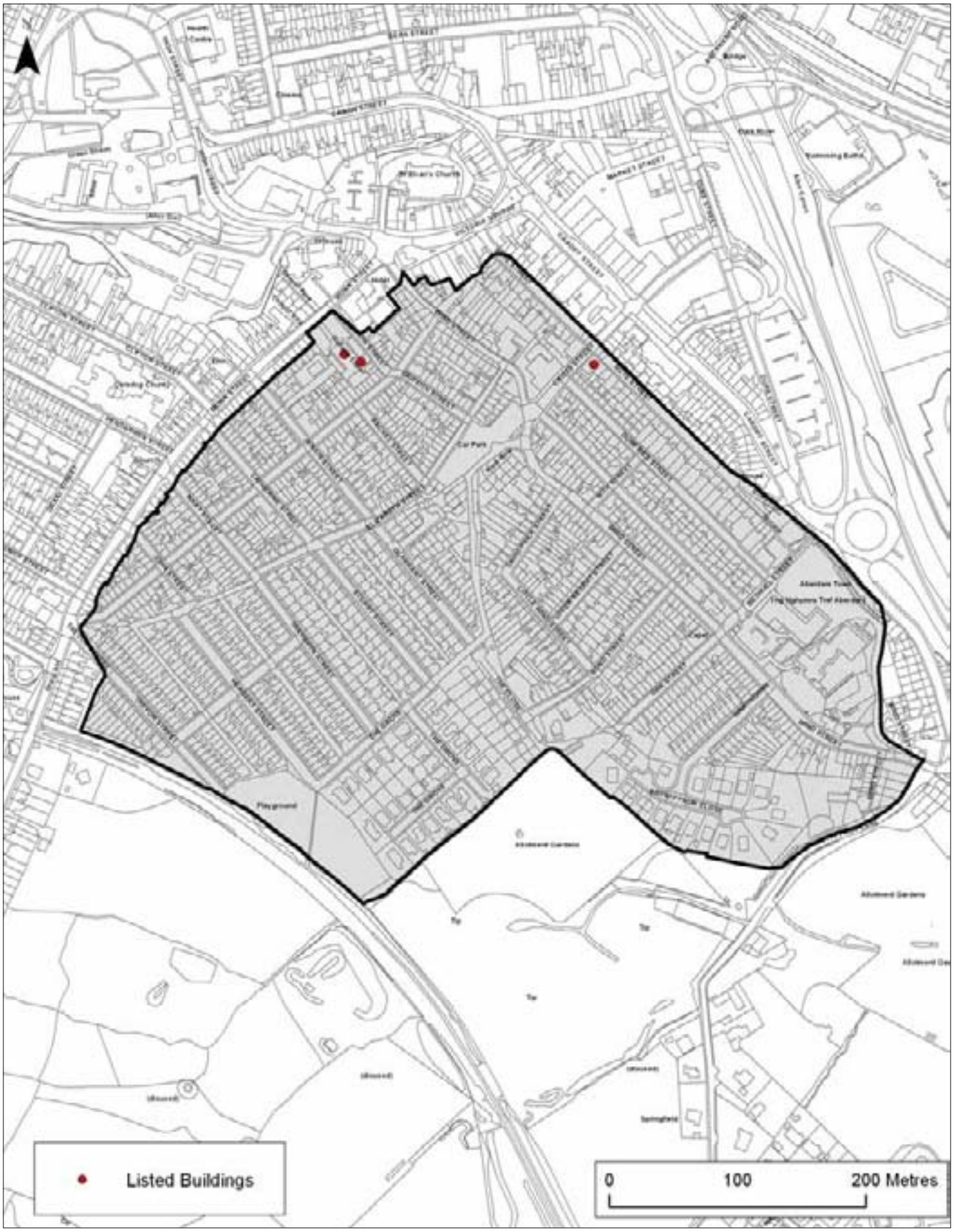
10 Foundry Town (4)



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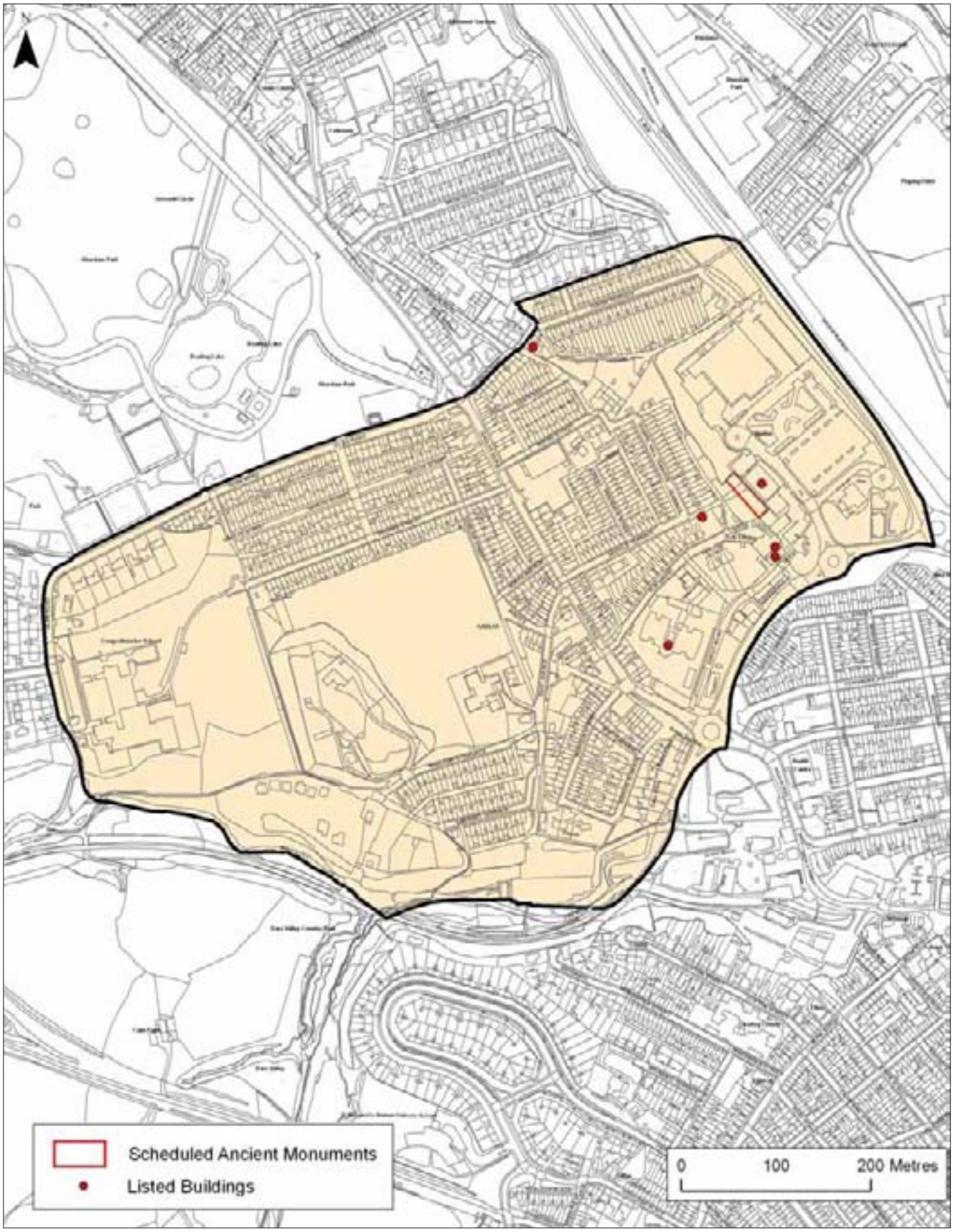
11 Gadlys (5)



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12 Monk Street (6)

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Cadw is the Welsh Assembly Government's historic environment service, working for an accessible and well-protected historic environment for Wales.

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