

Dolgellau:

Understanding Urban Character



Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru
Welsh Assembly Government



Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru
Welsh Assembly Government

Cadw
Welsh Assembly Government
Plas Carew
Unit 5/7 Cefn Coed
Parc Nantgarw
Cardiff CF15 7QQ

Telephone: 01443 33 6000
Fax: 01443 33 6001

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Welsh names have been included in the English text because they often contain valuable evidence for history and former usage, which is sometimes lost in translation.

Front cover: Aerial view of Dolgellau
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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. The survey is not just an audit of features, but a reconstruction

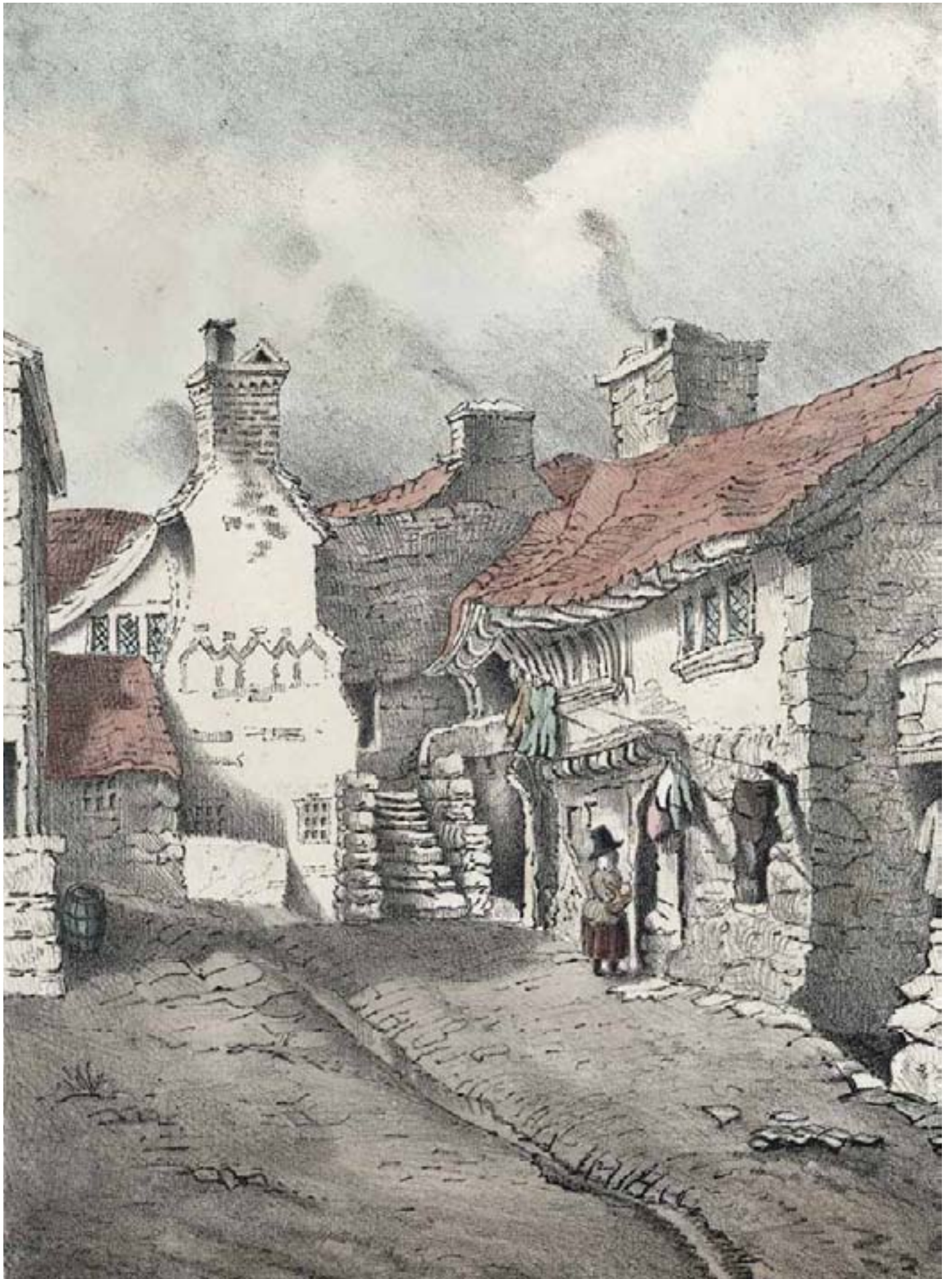
of the themes and processes which have shaped the town.

The immediate context for this study is as a contribution from Cadw towards Snowdonia National Park Authority's Stage Two bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund for a Townscape Heritage Initiative in Dolgellau. This initiative seeks not only the regeneration of the town through the conservation of its buildings, but also encourages greater access to, and understanding of, cultural heritage and the historic built environment.

Although the Townscape Heritage Initiative is focused on the Dolgellau 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.



Eldon Square is the biggest of the open spaces which are a distinctive feature of the town. It marks the site of the original market.



Historical Development

Origins

'The town developed almost by stealth, its urban characteristics unrecognised by royal administrators for several centuries'.¹

Dolgellau originated as a native Welsh settlement, a bond vill of the commote of Talybont, whose centre was at Rhyd-eryw in Llanegryn. The earliest reference to it comes in a survey of 1284 in which Dolgellau was listed as held by unfree tenants. This grouping of bondsmen may suggest the existence of a modest administrative centre, and although the settlement was small — with only three tax payers recorded in 1292–93 — during the century that followed it became the seat of the local commote or hundred court. The presence of a church (the first reference to which is the *Norwich Taxatio* of 1253) probably also served as a focal point. Dolgellau occupied a favourable position by a river crossing, on an economic frontier between the sheep and cattle grazing of the uplands, and the good arable lands of the lowlands. This siting may have fostered its development as a centre of exchange, and by the early fourteenth century accounts refer to a market here. The market was claiming a monopoly over trade in the area by the mid-fifteenth century. By the late sixteenth century (and perhaps earlier) the woollen trade was already flourishing. Alongside this economic function, the town continued to develop as an administrative centre in the years that followed — hundred courts, and (later) Quarter Sessions and Great Sessions were held here, as Dolgellau emerged as a rival to Harlech as the county town. Despite this, it was still described as a village in the 1530s, albeit 'the best village in this commote'.²

The town plan almost certainly encapsulates elements of the early organization of land use, but the earliest surviving buildings are unlikely to be earlier than the seventeenth century. The one documented medieval building in the town was Cwrt Plas yn Dre, which originated as a timber-framed hall-house (perhaps of fifteenth-century date). It was the home of Lewis Owen, who in 1552 leased the Crown's interests in the

town for an annual farm of 38s. 4d. After his death (he was assassinated by the 'Mawddwy bandits' in 1555), his son inherited the lease of 'the market town of Dolgelley and divers parcels of waste grounds and commons in and adjoining the town. One weekly market and three annual fairs have been kept time out of mind for the buying and selling of cattle and other commodities. The king's subjects have had their stalls and standings on the waste grounds, paying the Crown farmer divers sums of money for each site'.³ Defendants in disputed claims of possession were accused of 'pretence of title to the wastes. Building of houses and cottages on the commons in the town and enclosing parcels of land whereon stalls and standings used to be erected. Straightening the streets of the town and claiming the land to be their own freehold'.⁴ It is probably precisely this encroachment on common and waste land within the town which helps to account for its distinctive form, in which small islands of building colonize meandering open spaces between discrete parcels of land.

Cwrt Plas yn Dre was certainly timber framed. There may also be traces of framing within The Old Courthouse, and also within Plas Newydd, where the rendered panels either side of its bow windows are probably timber framed. However, with these important exceptions, the earliest surviving buildings are all built in stone.

Opposite: Cwrt Plas yn Dre, a timber-framed hall-house and the oldest documented domestic building in the town, was demolished in about 1885 (By permission of The National Library of Wales).

The Old Courthouse may originally have been timber framed.



Right: Plas Newydd — the early nineteenth-century frontage may conceal traces of a seventeenth-century timber-framed façade.



Below: Vernacular cottages of a type strongly characteristic of the town.



Cwrt Plas yn Dre was eventually demolished and partially re-erected in Newtown in about 1885. No other medieval buildings have survived, though there may be elements of early buildings incorporated in existing structures, and opportunities for more detailed investigation could be valuable in understanding the early development of the town. A distinctive early building type within the town has affinities with the regional rural vernacular — comprising one and a half storeys, with hipped or gabled dormers, and gable end (and sometimes lateral) chimneys. None of these buildings has been specifically dated, but a demolished row on Baker Street (Lon Bobty) were Bishop Rowland's almshouses, said to date from 1616. There are several houses of this type — Fro Awel and Glanarran Cottages — and more are documented in early paintings and photographs. They are distributed throughout the settlement, from the core area around the church and on up the slopes on the west of the river Arran. Most are single houses or pairs, but longer rows have been recorded (Tai Gwynion, Finsbury Square (Porth Canol), for example). The distribution pattern and organization of building — pairs and rows — suggests some density of development by the late seventeenth century at least, and was already more urban than rural.

Alongside these small vernacular houses is a series of larger town houses of seventeenth to eighteenth-century date, which gives us some indication of the importance of the town in this period. These include Tan y Fynwent and Y Meirionydd (both of which have lateral chimneys), Plas Gwyn, and, slightly later, the two substantial and clearly high-status buildings which form the core of The Golden Lion. Other buildings which are thought to have origins in this period include Plas Coch and The Unicorn. The complete rebuilding of the church in 1718 (said to have been built around its predecessor) is another good indication of prosperity and status by the early eighteenth century.

By the end of the eighteenth century, Dolgellau had become a significant town. Estate maps of 1760 and 1794 (Vaughans of Nannau and Hengwrt) show dense development in the core of the town, especially to the west of the line of Mill Street (Wtra'r Felin), then only a leat, and around what became Eldon Square (Stryd Fawr) and Queen's Square (Llys Owain). The areas to the



west and south of Eldon Square — Lombard Street (Y Lawnt), Meyrick Street (Heol Feurig) and South Street (Heol y Pandy) — whilst less densely built up, were also clearly within the extent of the town. Several high-status houses of this period ornament the town, especially on the higher ground to the south. That they were essentially conceived as town houses is clear from their context — rubbing shoulders with much smaller cottages, rather than separated in their own grounds.

By the early nineteenth century, the status of the town was not in doubt: 'Though a small market town, [it] is in many respects the principal in the county, from the summer sessions being held here, and being a manufacturing place, and a market for the sale of various articles in the clothing line'.⁵ A series of new civic buildings express this status: a gaol was built in 1811 (the site is now occupied by Nos 1–4 Bodlondeb), and a courthouse and town hall in 1825. The latter superseded the earlier town hall mentioned by Evans in 1812 as 'scarcely distinguishable from the other houses'.⁶ The new building, by a prominent architect, was an object of some distinction, and the old town hall was variously used for English church services, a school, and a theatre. A workhouse was built to the east of the town centre in about 1850. The new police station, also built around 1850, was sited on Lombard Street to the west, a measure, perhaps, of the rising importance of this part of the town.

Industry and Commerce

*'The mills, where nothing but hand looms are at work, will repay a visit from the curious in such matters.'*⁷

Throughout the course of the nineteenth century, there is good evidence for a continuous process of urban development and growth, and the majority of the town's historic buildings post-date about 1820. The town expanded to the south and west, but much building activity was concentrated in its centre, where there was extensive rebuilding. There is little doubt that the engine of this growth was industry, and especially, the growing importance of the textile trade to the fortunes of the town. Bingley referred to 'very considerable manufactories of flannel, which, from the number of hands necessarily employed, have rendered the place very populous'.⁸ A shift to factory production from outwork, and changes in marketing, almost certainly influenced the development of the town. 'Dolgelley and its vicinity have long been noted for the manufacture of a sort of coarse woollen cloth, or flannel, called 'webs', or 'Welsh plains', in which about one thousand four hundred persons are at present employed... in the last century they were chiefly sold directly from the loom; but fulling mills have since been erected upon the banks of the streams in the neighbourhood, and bleaching-grounds formed along the sides of the hills'.⁹ 'The principal market for goods is Shrewsbury, but so great a portion has of late been

Above left: The church, rebuilt in 1718.

Above: Tan y Fynwent, a substantial town house of the late seventeenth century.

Star House: two floors of loom shops are visible above the dwelling.



Below right: The attic taking-in door at Ty Meirion suggests its use within the textile industry.

Below: The long windows beneath the eaves may have originally lighted a weaving loft.



bought on the spot that the inhabitants have had little occasion to send to a market at such a distance'.¹⁰

There is plenty of surviving evidence in the town to chart the growing importance of the woollen industry, and changes in its organization from the early nineteenth century onwards. The shift from a domestic industry to factory production (though still reliant on handwork) is clearly traceable in the building stock. There are houses with weaving lofts — notably Star House on Meyrick Street which had two storeys of loom rooms, and No. 4 Lombard Street with its distinctive high upper storey — but also early purpose-built factories. The building to the rear of Salem Chapel on Cader Road (Ffordd Cader Idris) has all the appearance of a loom shop, with its bands of windows on the upper floor (its use as a school may have come later). Nos 1–3 Arran Road (Pont yr Arran) was a small woollen factory. Forden House on Mill Street also incorporated a weaving loft by the mid-nineteenth century and Ty Meirion in Eldon Square, which has a hoist to an upper floor, may also have included a loom shop or warehouse. Cambrian Mill, Well Street (Pant y



Pistyll), was purpose-built as a factory and warehouse. Plas yn Dre also has a hoist to its upper storey, suggesting attic warehousing. There is another probable weaving factory at the south end of Smithfield Street (Ffos y Felin). Fulling mills, which needed water power, were located out of the town centre in the valley of the Arran. The fragmentary remains of several mills and an impressive weir can still be seen close to the confluence of the Arran and Nant y Ceunant. Behind the Roman Catholic Church are the remains of another weir, crossed by a public footpath. Other crossings on the river — the stepping stones below Hen Felin, and the footbridge below South Street — also relate to former mill sites.

The shift to direct retail remarked on by early nineteenth-century observers is not visible in the building stock until much later, but Central Buildings, built in 1870, is a fine example of a large emporium combining warehouse and shop.

Other industries developed to take advantage of the agricultural economy of the region and the plentiful water supply afforded by the river Arran. 'Much business is done in the dressing of native lamb-skins and foreign lamb and kid skins, upwards of one hundred thousand of the former being sent annually to Worcester and Chester; and a few to London: tanning is also carried on to a considerable extent'.¹¹ One tannery occupied the land immediately north-west of Pont yr Arran. The site of another is now the small housing estate off South Street. There were also several 'skin houses' in the area now occupied by the Roman Catholic Church — the area once known as Skinners Square.

As a market town with a strong local industry, Dolgellau also served as an important local or regional retail centre. Surviving buildings provide considerable testimony to this and chart a clear typological development from simple houses with ground-floor shops (No. 1 Marion Road (Ffordd y Marian)) and shop extensions to houses (Star House, Meyrick Street), to full-blown commercial architecture. Parliament House, the former hardware shop, is an outstanding example of this: it was built as part of the redevelopment of an old quarter of the town in about 1885–86. Other examples of commercial architecture are Glyndwr Buildings and on a smaller scale, Waterloo Building.



Above: A factory in Smithfield Street.

Left: The rising importance of retail trade is reflected in large purpose-built shops such as Glyndwr Buildings.

Below: Cambrian Mill, Well Street.





Landownership

Another significant influence on the character of the town in the nineteenth century was landownership. Ownership lay in many hands, as the diverse character of building shows, but two estates were particularly important. The Vaughans of Nannau and Hengwrt were a powerful force. It was Robert Vaughan who was responsible for the development of Eldon Row. This is an early example of formal urban building, and the herald of more widespread improvement: 'The streets are irregularly faced and the houses mostly ill-built, but a good line of houses was begun on 4th June 1830 by Sir R.W.Vaughan Bart, and many parts of the town have recently experienced or are now undergoing considerable improvement'.¹² The sheer quantity of building of 1830–50 in the town amply bears him out.



Vaughan was also responsible for rebuilding The Golden Lion which was already considered the town's best inn in the early nineteenth century. He was instrumental in the building of the Courthouse in 1825 (his portrait hung inside it), and the gaol in 1811. The Llwyn estate also had scattered holdings in the town, but seems not to have involved itself directly in the building process. That there was only limited building to the north-east of the bridge over the Wnion before the twentieth century may be owing to landownership: much of this land was also part of the Llwyn estate, which perhaps had other ambitions for it.

Buildings and Society

If the extent of building in the early nineteenth century is a good indication of prosperity, its range reveals a complex social structure. The town possesses a considerable hierarchy of buildings: from rows of small houses and workers' cottages and detached and terraced larger town houses (for example, Ty Meurig), to substantial villas in their own grounds, the earliest of which include Fron Arran (1830), Brynhyfryd (1840), and Brynmair (1838). Units of development were generally small until the late nineteenth century. Few terraces are longer than three or four houses, reflecting fragmented landholding and the piecemeal availability of plots for building.

Top: Eldon Row is a good example of formal planned development by a major local landowner.

Above: Brynhyfryd, one of the earliest villas which became a characteristic feature of the town during the nineteenth century.

Right: Cottages on Cader Road.



The villas occupied substantial plots and attained a degree of isolation, but elsewhere, the mixing of buildings of different scale and status is a hallmark of development in the town. Substantial houses rub shoulders with small cottages, and even the later nineteenth-century developments to the east of the town provided houses of variable size — substantial houses with bay windows and front gardens were built close to rows of back-to-back cottages.

Dolgellau: Mountain Resort

The detached villas are indicative not only of local prosperity but also of the popularity of the area as a picturesque destination. Dolgellau was notable not least as a base for an ascent of Cadair Idris, and the picturesque qualities of its environs were frequently celebrated in nineteenth-century accounts. It is difficult to quantify the effect of this on the character of the town in the early days, though there was clearly considerable investment in the building of hotels: Vaughan's rebuilding of The Golden Lion was a prestigious project, and the scale of accommodation offered by The Royal Ship (also Vaughan property, rebuilt on the site of an earlier building in the early nineteenth century and extended some decades later) gives a good indication of the value of tourism in this period. Both had extensive service accommodation — stable yards etc. The third principal hotel in the town was The Angel Hotel (demolished and replaced by what is now the HSBC bank in 1923–24); ambitious plans for it were drawn up in 1800, though probably never implemented.

The arrival of the railway in 1867 had a decisive influence, and there are numbers of buildings which were clearly intended as boarding houses. Dolgellau was 'famous amongst tourists, anglers etc, and as visitors have increased, so has the number of villas and handsome houses built and specially fitted up for their accommodation, the appearance of the town being much improved thereby'.¹³ Good examples include Frondirion, 1–3 Bryntirion and 3–5 Bryn Teg, but there are many others of around 1870–1900. The railway had a direct physical impact on the town too — its arrival necessitated the modification of the bridge over the Wnion, and the demolition of the cluster of buildings that had once developed at the north end of the bridge — including the very large Hen and Chickens Inn.



Left: Meyrick Street — the juxtaposition of large town houses and small cottages is characteristic of the town.

Below: Late nineteenth-century villas at Bodlondeb.



The Late Nineteenth Century: Expansion and Renewal

Dolgellau witnessed a more general boom in the post-railway period, with extensive rebuilding, new building, and further work of town planning. Some of this was very ambitious — new streets were formed in the centre of the town: Springfield Street (Heol Plas Uchaf), Glyndwr Street (Heol Glyndwr), Plas yn Dre Street, Smithfield Street, and Cae Tanws Bach. The town also expanded, especially to the east.

Modern Times

Twentieth- (and twenty-first-) century development takes three principal forms: expansion of the built area, infill within the existing urban area, and clearance. In the twentieth century, a programme of council-house building contributed significantly to the expansion of the town. Two areas in particular were developed from the 1920s — north of the bridge and east of the river Arran. Development continued in the latter area after the war. Small sites in the Arran valley within the town were also developed or redeveloped (Sarn Road (Hen Felin), for example). There was also some speculative building: 'every encouragement is given for building by private enterprise', according to a town guide of 1962.¹⁴ Much of this was concentrated to the north of the river. In the 1950s–60s, there was also a programme of clearance, resulting in significant losses of especially smaller vernacular buildings within the town (e.g. Tai Gwynion, Finsbury Square, The Castle public house, and former almshouses etc on Baker Street).

Right: Twenty-first-century development in the Arran valley.

Below: The old town, with twentieth-century expansion to the north.

The town is continuing to expand, steadily encroaching onto former farmland on the slopes to the north, and on the high ground to the east of the river Arran, as well as within the Arran valley.



Historical Topography

'It is evident that the Romans had nothing to do in the ground plan of this town. The houses are just in the same order as the tartars pitch their tents'.¹⁵

'The Town has been built with an entire absence of preconceived plan, being an irregular network of narrow lanes, and the houses are often extremely cramped for space'.¹⁶

Visitors in the early nineteenth century agreed that the town had a haphazard and irregular appearance. Several of them repeat variations on a riddle: Here, for example, is the Reverend William Bingley, quoting a 'native of Dolgelle': "'There", says he, flinging on the table a handful of nuts, and setting up a cork in the middle, "suppose each of these nuts a house, and that cork the church, you will have some tolerable idea of Dolgelle". The analogy holds good, for the streets are as irregular as it is possible to imagine them, the houses in general are low and ill-built'.¹⁷

In spite of various attempts to impose order on the town in the nineteenth century, its plan remains remarkably informal (Refer to map 2 — page 41). It comprises a series of irregular plots of land which were perhaps once individual holdings, loosely dispersed around an area of open space with no defined boundaries — the area which later became Eldon Square and Queen's Square and which was presumably the site of the medieval market. Several encroachments were made onto this space, signalled by the landless buildings and blocks within it. These probably correspond to the encroachments referred to in the sixteenth-century document quoted on page 9.

Elsewhere, the meandering pattern of streets divides an almost cellular pattern of plots, and buildings cling to pre-existing curvilinear boundaries. We can see the way in which these boundaries constrained building in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the frequent oblique angles, chamfered corners, and curved frontages which are so characteristic of the town. These features serve to provide evidence for earlier boundaries and alignments lost in nineteenth-century improvements (e.g. to the rear of Eldon Row). These irregular plots are separated by a network of roads, lanes and footpaths,



Above left: Ty Meirion occupies an island site in what was probably once a large open market area.

Above: The curved building line of Well Street respects an earlier plot boundary.

Left: Linear building on South Street adheres to the boundary of an earlier plot.



occasionally opening out into a wider space, some of which are the so-called squares which are a feature of Dolgellau. In some areas, blocks of landless buildings suggest more encroachment onto other open spaces between these plots: at the south end of Well Street, for example, and the now demolished buildings in the open ground of Y Lawnt.

These cellular plots clearly formed the basis for urban development. Perhaps it is significant that several of them contain a single large house of probable early origin: The Unicorn, Plas Newydd, Plas Isaf (incorporated in The Golden Lion), Tan y



This early vernacular building was constrained by an early plot boundary, as the angled corner shows. It was later truncated when Smithfield Street was created and The Torrent Walk Hotel built.

Fynwent, Plas Gwyn, Plas Uchaf and previously, Cwrt Plas yn Dre. Even the earliest surviving buildings respect their boundaries (see for example the chamfered corner on the rear wing of The Torrent Walk Hotel, or Pen Brynbella). These plots are clearly indicated on the maps of 1760 and 1794, and some were already densely built up by that date. These maps also show the plot structure on which nineteenth-century expansion took place — e.g. the Meyrick Street/Bryn Teg area, the area to the west of South Street, and (later) the area to the east of Smithfield Street.

This plot structure contributes strongly to the character of the town, and linear development is rare before the late nineteenth century even though all the main roads into the town were turnpikes by the later eighteenth century: 'Every entrance... is barred by a turnpike'.¹⁸ There were gates on Cader Road, at the top of the bridge, and on Arran Road. But only Cader Road provided a clear building line, and then only for a short length between Chapel Lane and Creggenan Road. The formation of the turnpike may have entailed some rationalization of an earlier line, as the road seems to cut across earlier boundaries immediately to the south of Love Lane (Tylau Mair). Above all, it was the cellular plot structure that contained and shaped development. As the population of the town grew, these little nodes of settlement filled up, for example, with the development of courts, most of which have now gone. Cwrt Uchaf and Cwrt Isaf, South Street, for example, were demolished some

time after 1956. By the end of the nineteenth century, development was very dense indeed, and pressures on space had resulted in some ingenious forms of building: Dr Parsons referred to back-to-back, and houses in tiers, one above the others. He named Lombard Court — seven houses in a narrow well of a court entered only by archways — and English Terrace, which was two rows of back-to-back houses; also Chapel Buildings, a chapel converted into eight houses. At Hen Felin, a row of back-to-back houses had a third set of tenements under the back row, and another row with three sets of houses one above the other. Bye-laws for new building were adopted in 1884, but were, in his view, 'entirely disregarded'.¹⁹ Almost all of this dense development pattern has now been thinned out or lost entirely, but there is a trace of it still on the south side of Lombard Street.

Plots which had hitherto remained largely empty (and in agricultural use) also began to be surrounded by building. This is particularly true to the south of the town — the near-continuous building line along South Street and Y Domen Fawr was established during the nineteenth century, where there had only been intermittent building at the end of the previous century.

Onto this clustering of densely developed plots, nineteenth-century landowners attempted to impose some order. Eldon Row is probably the first of these — traces of an earlier arrangement are recorded on estate maps of 1794 and 1820, and are perhaps indicated in the alignment of buildings and boundaries to its rear. Much later saw the formation of new streets on the east side of Eldon Square. Plas yn Dre Street and Glyndwr Street were cut through against the grain of existing boundaries in the 1880s. Their creation involved the demolition of earlier buildings on other alignments including Cwrt Plas yn Dre itself ('amongst a range of wretched hovels at the back of the post-office' in 1837), its place later occupied by an ironmongery store.²⁰ In some cases, individual buildings were truncated in this process: the former agricultural merchants on Glyndwr Street has a late nineteenth-century front on what seems to be an earlier building. Smithfield Street (Ffos y Felin) was another new creation, taking the line of an earlier mill leat, as its Welsh name indicates. Springfield Street was also pushed through: its projected line was shown on a plan of 1868, the property of James Lloyd Tamberlaine. On a smaller scale, a series of demolitions rationalized



Far left: Dense building to the rear of Lombard Street — one of the few surviving examples of court development.

Smithfield Street (left) and Springfield Street (below) are both creations of the late nineteenth century, cutting through earlier plot lines.

the street and building pattern elsewhere, most notably to the east and south of Eldon Square, where in 1881 Crosby Buildings replaced an earlier row on a slightly different alignment to widen the junction with Upper Smithfield Street, where at least one building which had previously projected into the line of street was demolished. 'At last the old houses at the top of Eldon Square... are being pulled down. It will be recollected that there was a good deal of haggling with respect to the gable end of one of these houses, which the conditions of sale stated was to be removed further in, whenever it would be rebuilt. The effect of such removal would be the widening of the street corner opposite Victoria Buildings by about three feet. Thirty years ago... another building outside this disputed gable was pulled down by the late Sir Robert Vaughan, its then owner, for the purpose of widening the street'.²¹



Elsewhere, later development took place on land which had not been developed previously. The town expanded to the south-west, mainly with larger houses and a series of villas in their own grounds, and to the east, where a new industrial and residential quarter was developed between the newly formed Smithfield Street and the river Arran, between 1886 and 1900. A small residential suburb was also established along Arran Road, where plots were set out for sale in 1877. After the arrival of the railway, the area north of the Wnion was also developed, though here it was large villas and boarding houses which were characteristic: their picturesque aspirations are revealed not only in the visual variety and decorative vocabulary of the buildings themselves, and their well-planted gardens, but also in their names, many of which have a sylvan theme (Hafod y Coed, Coed Cymmer, and Tyn y Coed).



Villas were characteristic of the town's growth during the nineteenth century.

The Character of Building

Wall Materials and Finishes

Dolgellau is resolutely a town of stone and slate. It was however once home to one of the very few recorded timber-framed buildings in Merionydd — Cwrt Plas yn Dre, and there may also be traces of timber framing in The Old Courthouse and Plas Newydd. From the seventeenth century at least, though, stone has dominated the local vernacular, and it was not displaced until the twentieth century. Even the arrival of the railway did not introduce brick in any quantity.

The local geology produces plentiful stone (there are quarries to the south-west of the town adjacent to the Creggenan Road, and above Bryn Teg), but it is not necessarily the most tractable for building, being difficult to cut and dress. Generally it was worked in large blocks, needing considerable ingenuity in the handling. 'The masonry of Dolgellau merits particular notice. From time immemorial, they have built with very large stones, even to the top, lifting the stones to the work from towards the middle course, with an immense machine, which takes above a day to erect, as to require a lever of that vast power. Quere if this is not a dear sort of masonry. The lintels of doors and windows are generally of immense stones'.²²

We have already encountered the changes that were made to the plan of Dolgellau from the late nineteenth century onwards, to try to accommodate the increasing scale and volume of traffic in the streets of the town. Coupled with those changes, and again brought about by the development of Dolgellau as a destination for tourists, was a dramatic transformation in the appearance of its buildings. Dolgellau consciously created a new visual identity for itself by the systematic removal of its traditional external finishes. The townscape is now characterized by walls of chunky grey, almost loursing, stonework. Yet there is overwhelming evidence that, prior to the third quarter of the nineteenth century, the great majority of these buildings were covered externally with lime render and/or limewash. Traces of these



Top: Stonework detail, South Street.

Centre: Stonework detail, Eldon Square area.

Bottom: Limewash in a porch at Pandy yr Odyn Cottages.

finishes are discernible everywhere in the town. White was the predominant choice of colour for the limewash, although pink seems to have been favoured by a few daring souls. The renders and washes are still evident on many of the buildings constructed in the 1830s and 1840s.

The date at which scraping off the traditional finishes started is difficult to determine, but it probably gained momentum fairly swiftly. In a description of 1850 'the site is so lovely and the grouping of the grey stone buildings so good at most points that the traveller is somewhat disappointed on entering the mean irregular streets to find that distance has lent enchantment to the view'.²³

Bare stone appears to have been the desirable and fashionable finish by the 1870s, associated with the use of particular dressing techniques (well-squared stonework and especially rock-faced stonework). The change was fuelled by the Victorian misconception that bare stonework was authentically ancient and natural. Most medieval churches in Wales were harshly denuded of their original renders in the same period for the same reason, but it is rare to find a whole town being subjected to the treatment. For a place wishing to attract visitors by promoting itself as an ancient market town the process must have seemed appealing, and the light, bright streets of a white Dolgellau turned resolutely grey.

There appear to have been very few instances of full or multi-coat rendering. The normal technique seems to have been more akin to a full and liberal pointing of joints, with sometimes a thin smear-coat of mortar extended across the faces of stones. The whole appearance was then unified by multiple applications of limewash, inexorably building up into a protective skin around the exterior of the building, the outlines of individual stones blurred and softened in the process.

No completely rendered or limewashed buildings survive in the town, although there are examples still to be seen in the outskirts. What remains are isolated elevations, mostly in locations that are out of the public eye, plus an occasional feature such as the interior of a porch or a flight of steps. These surviving examples need to be safeguarded, and owners encouraged (and assisted financially) to maintain them by repair and the application of further coats of limewash. Where fragmentary

evidence survives on other buildings, it should be noted, and protected from damage or removal during any works of repair or alteration. The idea of reintroducing renders and limewashes to buildings that formerly had these finishes should not be discounted, and could be accommodated within the category of assistance within a Townscape Heritage Initiative Scheme of reintroducing lost architectural detail. More pertinently perhaps, the traditional finishes could be promoted for infill sites or peripheral developments where their use would have the economic advantage of permitting the choice of poorer quality or even 'artificial' stone.

In addition to surface finish, there is considerable variety in the handling of stone. Characteristic of earlier buildings are large quarried blocks which were only roughly worked (for example, at Tan y Fynwent), and there are rare examples of the use of river boulders (for example, in workshops on South Street). From the later eighteenth century, there was greater use of cut stone laid in more regular courses, and a distinctive masonry style in which smaller stones packed out the joints of irregular blocks to help bring them to courses. This variety reflected advances in stoneworking



Above: Limewash on an ancillary building at Coed Wenallt.

Left: River stones used in a former workshop, South Street.

Coursed and squared stonework, Bridgend.

techniques, and provides us with important clues to the phasing of building and alteration. Techniques also varied with levels of investment, giving an indication of a building's status. There was everything from finely worked ashlar (e.g. parts of The Golden Lion and the police station), to roughly-coursed rubble, and it became increasingly common to distinguish between the main façade (where finer working was concentrated) and the side and rear walls. From 1870, there was a marked change in the dressing of stone and in the style of working it: a rock-faced, snecked masonry façade style dominates later nineteenth-century building in the town, overshadowing examples of other techniques such as the heavily tooled ashlar of Agriculture House.



Right: Coursed and squared stonework, Lombard Street.



Far right: Vernacular stonework, Cader Road.



Right: Contrasting stonework styles, The Golden Lion.



Far right: Channelled ashlar, the old Police Station.



Roofs

Turning now to other materials in the town, there are a few surviving examples of traditional slating techniques that must once have been common in Dolgellau before the advent of railways and the arrival of the almost ubiquitous large, thin slates of Penrhyn and Bethesda. Roofs of random or diminishing courses should be guarded with pride, as should the few examples of the hybrid swept and laced slatework which is characteristic of historic roof valleys in the town and its environs. A general reintroduction of this older type of roofing is patently not possible, but it could be promoted for the re-roofing of the few remaining seventeenth-century houses in the town, and especially the smaller vernacular buildings such as Fro Awel and Cemlyn House.

Dolgellau is fortunate in retaining a lively and distinctive roof-scape of which chimneys are the most obvious component (though it is as well to remember also the town's prominent gables, dormers and angled walls). Dolgellau's chimneys tend to be big and bold. Their juxtaposition with each other, and their use of devices such as ornate cappings and weather coursing, provide vital evidence for the dates of construction and the sequences of developments. Chimneys should not be lowered or removed, whether the building is listed or not. A building shorn of its chimneys suffers a damaging blow to its character and hence to the character of the town as a whole. If at all possible, the designers of new structures in Dolgellau should be encouraged to incorporate chimneys — and not spindly examples, either.



Above: Graded slate on The Unicorn.



Left: Chimneys in the Meyrick Street area.



Far left: A rare surviving example of graded slate, Meyrick Street.



Left: Valley detail restored at The Golden Lion.

Architectural Detail

The town is remarkable for its widespread retention of original windows, for which the conservation staff at the National Park office must take much of the credit. It cannot be stressed too highly that windows and their distinctive period detailing provide the most obvious and generally reliable clues to the age of a building. Dolgellau is doubly fortunate in retaining countless examples of original glass. Any repair or renewal of windows in the town should seek, as a matter of course, to retain and reuse the existing glass. It is a rare, precious and finite resource of historic fabric. Of inappropriately designed or UPVC windows there are, of course, examples to be found. It is to be hoped that with the commencement of a



Above: Well-maintained architectural detail, South Street.

Right: Traditional paintwork and sash windows, Upper Smithfield Street.



Townscape Heritage Initiative, and the introduction of Article 4 Directions by the local planning authority coupled with generous grants to replace the few rogue examples, the fenestration of Dolgellau will become a model to be emulated by other towns in Wales.

Finally, a word about shop fronts. Dolgellau has some extremely fine historic examples, which should be protected and cherished. But the town is not alone in having suffered from the introduction of too many brutally modern examples that are wrong in scale and materials. A sustained programme of improvement through the sensitive application of Development Control policies, coupled possibly with financial incentives via the Townscape Heritage Initiative, should bring substantial townscape benefits. But one must guard against the usual 'in-keeping' proposals. These invariably display little or no real understanding of period construction and detailing and the results are patently bogus and unsatisfying. Large-scale detailed drawings, particularly of joinery construction, should accompany every proposed new shop front. Simplicity of design often produces a more convincing result than a scheme that is loaded with excessive Victoriana. Good proportions, well-thought-out detailing and quality materials are the fundamental aspects. It goes without saying that Dolgellau is a town of painted timberwork, not only for shop fronts but also for all windows and doors, and stained or varnished wood should be regarded as an alien intrusion.

Building Types

Dolgellau exhibits a remarkable range of domestic building types, suggesting a complex social structure. Amongst the earliest buildings to survive is a distinctive vernacular cottage type displaying considerable uniformity of form. By the late seventeenth century and during the eighteenth century, the building stock also included some significant town houses (Plas Gwyn, Plas y Ffynnon, and Plas Isaf). Extensive new building in the nineteenth century has given us a far more complete social structure, ranging from very small cottages to very large villas, reflecting the diverse economy and society of the town in this period.

Although short terraces and paired houses and cottages were already being built along with single



houses in the seventeenth century, units of development were generally small until the end of the nineteenth century. Even when new streets were created in the later nineteenth century, the characteristic building pattern remained one of small units: Springfield Street, for example, comprised terraces, pairs of houses and a detached villa. More unified schemes of building were introduced for the rather later development to the south of Glyndwr Street where Aberwnion Terrace and English Terrace originally comprised blocks of back-to-back houses, and on the north of Arran Road where unified development was emphasized in symmetrical composition. Twentieth-century council-house building (and to a lesser extent inter-war speculative building) introduced unified development on a much greater scale. This has remained characteristic of more recent development — whether expressed in terraced groups (e.g. Nant y Gader, Creggenan Road) or in the repetition of detached units — though there has also been piecemeal individual development on Creggenan Road, Ffordd Bodlondeb, and the former drive to Bryn y Gwin.

The range of building types indicative of the developing economy of the town in the nineteenth century has already been discussed in the section *Industry and Commerce*: an exceptionally good series of nineteenth-century industrial and commercial buildings provide powerful testimony to the importance of the textile industry and to the organization of retail.



Top left: Pont yr Arran Cottage — one of the best examples of the vernacular cottage which was typical of Dolgellau before the nineteenth century.

Streets: Furniture and Finishes

The town retains significant elements of traditional surfaces — cobbled forecourts are particularly characteristic, and good examples survive in front of The Royal Ship, and along Meyrick Street. After the coming of the railway, Staffordshire Blue pavements with an incised diamond pattern used with slate or clay kerbs were introduced. The cast-iron street signs which also survive around the town were probably made in a local foundry.

Above and top right: Industrial housing in a planned development to the rear of Glyndwr Street.

Left: A symmetrical composition indicates planned development on Arran Road.

Character Areas

1. Central Area

(Eldon Square, Queen's Square, Bridge Street, Smithfield Street, and Upper Smithfield Street)

Historical Development and Topography

Eldon Square and Queen's Square form a central open space around which is a series of cellular plots of land that are densely built up. The open space was almost certainly the marketplace of the medieval settlement. A series of apparent encroachments onto the open space of the squares may themselves have early origins (encroachments were referred to in a sixteenth



Above: The building line of Mill Street reflects the boundary of an early plot.

Right: Bridgend was built to respect an earlier plot line, but the straight line of Smithfield Street (built over a former mill leat) was the result of urban improvement in the nineteenth century.



to seventeenth-century lawsuit). Ty Meirion, The Old Courthouse (probably the pre-1825 town hall, with significant seventeenth-century fabric), and perhaps The Royal Ship and Central Buildings — maybe even Eldon Row itself — are characteristic of encroachments, where the building occupies the whole of the plot as an 'island' site.

Around the market area, discrete plots of land were gradually developed with buildings. On these plots, buildings adhered to the perimeters, resulting in some oddly angled corners in places. But building also took place within the plots: the laundry building behind Nos 1–3 Bridgend is an extant example, and there are clear remains of others both within this block, and between Mill Street and Upper Smithfield Street. These plots of land were divided by narrow lanes and alleyways until a campaign of town improvement and rebuilding in the nineteenth century introduced new street and building lines. Eldon Row itself rationalized an earlier building line on the west side of Eldon Square: there may be clues to the earlier pattern of building in the alignments of buildings and boundaries to its rear. Mill Street, Waterloo Street (Heol y Dwr) and Bridge Street (Heol y Bont) mark early divisions between plots, whereas Smithfield Street was developed on the line of a former mill leat. Plas yn Dre Street and Glyndwr Street were carved through an earlier plot, cutting across prior building alignments. The medieval house of Cwrt Plas yn Dre was demolished in 1885 during this programme of work. The house was recorded before its demolition, and survey drawings show its origins as a timber-framed house, with fine spere truss to the open hall. A brief campaign to save it came to nothing, but part of it was re-erected in Newtown where it survives as the Quaker Meeting House.

The Character of Building

The importance of the central area of the town is underscored by successive periods of investment in its buildings (including cycles of rebuilding). Although there are important traces of an earlier history, much of the built character derives from the nineteenth century. There is a distinctive building phase of about 1820–40, and a second major phase

around 1880, but it is clear that both of these were rebuilding rather than new building.

Another index of importance is the scale of building in this area, both in terms of the size of individual buildings (many of which are three-storeyed), and by the size of units of development: Eldon Row and Crosby Buildings are both examples of planned development of 1830 and 1880 respectively. Other examples of large-scale development from the later nineteenth century include Glyndwr Buildings and the block on Smithfield Street between Cae Tanws Bach and Glyndwr Street.

Vernacular buildings on Mill Street (part of The Torrent Walk Hotel and The Cross Keys public house) and Waterloo Street (nos 1–2) survive from an earlier period of development in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, confirming the early origins of this plot structure and clearly respecting its boundaries. Other vernacular buildings are recorded but have now been lost — The Old Swan (possibly on the site of Glyndwr Buildings), and The Castle public house on the south-west corner of Lion Street.

There are examples of more ambitious building in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Plas Newydd incorporates what is thought to be a seventeenth-century house as its rear range, and may also have a timber-framed frontage. Plas Isaf was a large town house belonging to the Nannau estate, and was rebuilt in the nineteenth century (incorporated in The Golden Lion). Another possible example of a seventeenth-century house, listed as Dilys Meredith, survives on Upper Smithfield Street. By the later eighteenth century building development of a different and more obviously urban kind was underway: Nos 1–3 Bridge Street and The Stag public house, and Nos 1–3 Bridgend are both short terraces of smaller town houses, implying a speculative building process.

The early vernacular buildings are typically small in scale (one and a half storeyed), and rubble-built (the limewash finish of The Cross Keys public house has been reinstated). The larger vernacular buildings from this period, and the early urban buildings of the later eighteenth century are also rubble-built, and there are strong indications that limewash was common — for example, traces survive on Dilys Meredith, Upper Smithfield Street.



Crosby Buildings: A late nineteenth-century unified development.



Bridgend is an early example of organized building — a short terrace rather than a single house.



A traditional limewash finish reinstated at The Cross Keys public house.

Stonework detail at Ty Meirion.



Right: The Golden Lion with fine stonework, a nineteenth-century addition to an earlier building.



Below: Evidence for the textile industry at Forden House.



During extensive building and rebuilding during the early nineteenth century, distinctive urban building forms were adopted — characteristically, at least three-storeyed and in the Georgian tradition. The formal terrace of Eldon Row is an exceptional example, but Ty Meirion also exhibits sophistication in construction (its coursed rubble has lacing courses at each floor), and in detail (symmetrical elevation, tripartite sashes and classical shop front). Other buildings from this period include the Boots building, Siop Hughes, and the bakery on Upper Smithfield Street. Stonework was generally coursed, with blocks either roughly squared and packed out with smaller stones, or more regularly squared.

The late nineteenth-century building boom dominates the east side of the town centre. Buildings are characteristically large scale: three or more storeys and either large single commercial establishments or blocks of shops or housing. A snecked masonry finish was widely adopted for façades, contrasting with the rougher rubble used in rear and side walls. Some of the larger commercial buildings adopted a palazzo style with renaissance detail and a strong composition.

As the commercial heart of the town, the area includes good indications of its economic development during the nineteenth century. Though intermixed with domestic buildings, the area has a strong commercial character. The textile industry is well represented: Forden House is an early industrial building incorporating weaving lofts, and Ty Meirion may also have housed warehousing, workshops or retail. Central Buildings is an excellent example of a late nineteenth-century emporium combining warehousing with retail. Plas yn Dre is a late nineteenth-century house with attic warehousing. Hotels and inns also played an important part in the economy of the town in the nineteenth century. Pre-eminent was The Golden Lion which incorporated Plas Isaf and which was rebuilt by Robert Vaughan in 1839 — its architectural composition and the quality of materials (ashlar) are indicative of its ambitions. The Royal Ship also testifies to expanding trade by the scale of mid-nineteenth-century additions to an already substantial building of the earlier nineteenth century. There is also a good range of shop buildings, of which Parliament House and Glyndwr Buildings are especially good late nineteenth-century examples. Crosby Buildings was also purpose-built as a row of shops.

2. Lombard Street (Y Lawnt) Area

Historical Development and Topography

Like the central area, this area represents part of the core of the town, and development is based upon a series of irregular plots separated by narrow lanes. There may also have been larger open spaces between these plots of land, on which building later encroached, giving the characteristic landless building block. A good example of this 'island' development occupies the space between the two arms of Well Street (a space undeveloped until the nineteenth century), and there were formerly buildings in the open area of Y Lawnt (demolished in the twentieth century).

Buildings are constrained by the boundaries of these plots, resulting in some abrupt angles or curved frontages. But there is also evidence of development in the interior of the plots — although the early cottage on Well Street (The Cottage) pre-dates the perimeter buildings which are all nineteenth century. Two courts survive on the south side of Lombard Street as a reminder of the density of building in the town during the nineteenth century.

Lombard Street marked the limit of the town to the north-west, and although the narrow line of building along its north-west boundary was established early, the land behind remained undeveloped until the twentieth century.

The Character of Building

The area was already densely built up by the end of the eighteenth century, but most buildings post-date 1800. Earlier buildings include The Cottage on Well Street, which is a vernacular cottage perhaps of the seventeenth century. Buildings on Baker Street may also be early, and a row of almshouses here (demolished in the twentieth century) were thought to have been built in 1616. Tan y Fynwent is a seventeenth to eighteenth-century town house and an important indicator of wealth and status in that period.

Most buildings in the area belong to the period 1800–1850, with very few later nineteenth-century buildings (exceptions include Islwyn Terrace on Lombard Street, and a pair of narrow villas adjacent to the old police station). Most building



The Cottage, Well Street: a traditional vernacular cottage, and an example of the density of building within the core of the town.



The acute angle at the rear of No. 1 Finsbury Square was necessitated by a pre-existing plot boundary.

is recognizably urban, conceived as a series of pairs or terraces in a simple Georgian vernacular, a style applied to houses and cottages of varying size and status.

The influence of the underlying plot structure is very apparent, especially on Well Street, where nos 5 and 6 are built with a curved frontage, contrasting with the angled façades of nos 2 and 3. At the junction of Well Street and Finsbury Square, No. 1 Finsbury Square has an acutely angled gable. Clues to the boundary lines that preceded the construction of Eldon Row lie in the similarly angled façade of the Gladstone House block.

Although the area is now strongly domestic in character it was fully integrated into the industrial and commercial economy of the town. No. 4 Lombard Street was built to incorporate a woollen factory in its upper floors, whilst Cambrian Mill on Well Street with the works building to its rear is also almost certainly linked to the textile industry. The Old Bank is an early example of a commercial building indistinguishable from a house (in contrast to the later nineteenth-century former North and South Wales Bank at the junction of Marion Road and Lombard Street). There are good examples of small nineteenth-century shops at No. 1 Marion Road, and Llys y Delyn, Lombard Street. The area also housed the first police station of 1850.



Above: Evidence of the woollen industry on Lombard Street.



Right: A well-preserved shop front at No. 1 Marion Road.

3. South Area

(Meyrick Street, South Street, lane west of Bryn Teg, Love Lane, and Finsbury Square)

Historical Development and Topography

South of Upper Smithfield Street to Cader Road the pattern of development is also based on a cellular plot structure. The block of land bounded to the north by Plas Newydd is a particularly good example, with buildings forming a near-circle, and with dense building in the centre of the plot (including some ruins). Meyrick Street, Bryn Teg, and Finsbury Square once formed the boundaries of another plot, sliced through by the creation of Springfield Street in the 1860s. The importance of this plot structure in containing development is apparent in Finsbury Square, where buildings respect earlier plot boundaries rather than the road line. Both sides of Meyrick Street had been built up by the end of the eighteenth century, and there are several early vernacular houses here. The maps of 1760 and 1794 also show Y Domen Fawr quite clearly, as an open space surrounded by buildings clustered along the margins of adjacent plots of land. Development was confined to the northern and eastern margins of this area until the later nineteenth century, when the formation of Springfield Street and Upperfield Street created a new axis for building within its interior.

From Y Domen Fawr, South Street and a network of footpaths to the west delineate another large plot which has remained largely undeveloped beyond its eastern periphery, retaining an agricultural character. It was cut through by a new road to the rear of South Street in the later twentieth century. Estate maps of 1760 and 1794 show this plot quite clearly, with buildings clinging to its eastern margins, and two or three houses elsewhere (one of these is the site of Pen y Bryn, whose rear outbuilding may possibly be the predecessor of the present house). Between Mount Pleasant Road (Bryn Teg) and Love Lane, the boundary of another plot is clearly respected by the chamfered corner of Pen Brynbella, a probable seventeenth to eighteenth-century vernacular cottage.

To the east of Meyrick Street is a series of smaller plots bounded by the river Arran. One of these was occupied by a tannery from the early

nineteenth century at least. The site was redeveloped with a small housing estate in the mid-twentieth century. Upper Smithfield Street represents the rationalization and widening of an earlier line, which was virtually blocked by a building projecting south from Eldon Square until the late nineteenth century. Victoria Buildings (1870) and Liverpool House (1830) may represent the site of another encroachment onto a former open space, though clearly respecting the line of Unicorn Lane.

Unlike the town centre, development here is generally smaller scale, comprising single buildings or very short rows, and the different fortunes of different plots are clearly indicated in the radically different scales of adjacent buildings. Substantial town houses punctuate the piecemeal development of short rows, creating an almost continuous building line along Y Domen Fawr and South Street by the later nineteenth century.

The density of development varied, presumably with landownership. One of the most notoriously crowded areas was Hen Felin (described by Dr Parsons in 1888), in what is now the Sarn Road area, but it was eventually cleared and the area redeveloped. Similarly South Street was densely built up on its western side. Two courts were located here, but a single building line is all that remains. The formation of Springfield Street and Upperfield Street represented an opportunity for unified development, but though the sale particulars suggested a uniform layout, what was built included substantial villas as well as a series of short terraces.

The Character of Building

A series of buildings with seventeenth-century origins hints at the extent of settlement in this period: Plas Coch, The Unicorn and Plas Newydd are all thought to incorporate seventeenth-century fabric, albeit in all cases extended and remodelled in the early nineteenth century. The original buildings may all have been substantial houses. Plas Uchaf is also thought to have seventeenth or eighteenth-century origins as a town house, but was rebuilt in the mid-nineteenth century and re-oriented with a picturesque frontage facing inwards over its garden. Plas Gwyn is eighteenth century and a substantially intact town house. These large houses are quite distinct from the smaller vernacular buildings which have also



survived in this area (Fro Awel, Cemlyn House, Isfryn House, Glan Arran Cottages, and Pen Brynbella). Rising prosperity is reflected in the character of buildings from the later eighteenth century, including a series of ambitious town houses. Glan Arran was probably built to replace an earlier cottage, and abuts two vernacular cottages in a juxtaposition of very different scales of building. Tan y Gader of 1800, Glanafon of 1820, Ty Meurig of around 1830 and Mervinian House also sit in the midst of much smaller buildings.

The setting of these buildings — in relatively small plots of land and juxtaposed with much smaller housing — suggests that they were closely allied with an urban or even industrial economy. Prime examples of this may be Star House and Springfield Villa: the former is a house of about 1800 built to incorporate two floors of weaving lofts with independent external access. Springfield Villa is a mid- to late nineteenth-century house linked to Star House via the stair and bridge which gave access to the loom shops.

Rather different in character is a series of mid-nineteenth-century and later houses which seem to relate to the picturesque movement. Some of these are individual houses set in their own grounds — Tan yr Allt and Fron Arran of about 1830. Others are pairs or short terraces — Y Graig and Rhoslyn and the houses on Bryn Teg.

Contrasting scales of development: Glan Arran, South Street.

These seem built for single occupancy, but the larger terrace on Bryn Teg, and the three houses that comprise Bryntirion, with their large windows and bays, may have been intended as boarding houses for the holiday trade.

Most of the surviving building in this area is domestic, though there are commercial and industrial buildings on the edge of the town centre. Chief amongst these is the fine early nineteenth-century frontage of Plas Newydd (an inn with stabling and houses to the rear in 1820), whilst Victoria Buildings and Liverpool House are examples of later nineteenth-century commercial architecture and town improvement — establishing a rational building line at the head of Meyrick Street. Adjacent to the bridge over the Arran was a small textile factory of 1830, whilst Star House represents an earlier generation of textile production, when loom shops were incorporated in the upper floors of a house.

Right: The large windows and gothic detailing of Bryntirion, built to serve the growing holiday trade, are typical of the later nineteenth century.

Below: Informal rows of large houses characterize the development of the South Area in the nineteenth century.



4. Tanws Area

Historical Development and Topography

The mill leat which was later taken by the line of Smithfield Street marked the eastern limit of development in the town at the end of the eighteenth century. The area to the east of the leat was developed only at its upper (southern end) where Pont yr Arran Cottage is a good example of the rural vernacular building type characteristic of early buildings in the town. A small cluster of buildings shown here on the 1794 map probably included a mill. There was a tannery here by 1820, and the area still has an industrial character. The Courthouse was built to the north of this area in 1825, and in 1850, the town gasworks was established. The Retort House, Governor House, and some contemporary housing survive. But significant development took place here only at the end of the nineteenth century, associated with the formation of Smithfield Street, and the new streets (Glyndwr Street and Plas yn Dre Street) to its east, giving the area a strongly unified character as an industrial suburb.

Although the area was developed with mixed residential and industrial functions, they were firmly spatially segregated. Immediately adjacent to Pont yr Arran the tannery area was separated from the new streets of houses to its north by a high stone boundary wall (extant). The wood yard and joinery workshop also has a clearly defined boundary. Only the warehousing/workshops on Glyndwr Street and Cae Tanws Bach, and the former printing works on Cae Tanws Bach, were intermixed with housing. To the south of Glyndwr Street a small and unusually coherent residential area was developed between around 1886 and 1903.

The Character of Building

Because most of the area was developed over a short period in the later nineteenth century it has a consistent character, reinforced by the widespread use of a dark sneaked facing stone. Along the two principal streets, units of development were relatively small, and there is a variety of house types, including paired villas with bay windows and short terraces with front gardens. Aberwnion Terrace, English Terrace and Talyrafon Buildings form a very coherent development. Aberwnion Terrace and English Terrace were probably built as back-to-backs.



5. Western Area

Historical Development and Topography

West of Love Lane, the underlying character of the topography changes. Although the area between Love Lane and Ffordd Bodlondeb is characterized by curvilinear boundaries and threaded by footpaths, it does not have the pronounced cellular structure of the urban area, and seems to have remained as farmland, largely undeveloped until the nineteenth century. From 1830, the slopes began to be colonized by substantial villas set in spacious grounds. Small-scale developments in the twentieth century began to erode this character, but it is the villas and their sylvan settings which dominate the area.

A different underlying structure is also suggested by the character of development along Cader Road. Beyond Love Lane, development is oriented to the road line rather than to plot boundaries, giving it a linear character. Piecemeal development was shown on the 1794 map, and Salem Chapel was established in 1766, but the character of building is largely nineteenth century.

Building is mainly domestic, but there are two buildings which may have had an industrial function — the former school room at Salem Chapel and the building adjacent to Bryn House.

The Character of Building

The earliest villas use a simple Georgian idiom, but by the mid-nineteenth century, a taste for the picturesque introduced a decorative vocabulary of big gables and large windows.

On Cader Road, development is typically mixed, ranging from quite large single or paired late eighteenth to early nineteenth-century houses, to small cottage rows. As elsewhere, even the larger houses occupy relatively small plots of land, suggesting that they belong to an urban and perhaps industrial economy. Bryn House is a particularly good example of this, not least because its large outbuilding has all the appearance of a textile warehouse or workshop. Erw Wen and its neighbour are a fine pair of early nineteenth-century houses with good Georgian detail, remodelled in the later nineteenth century when given an additional storey, and bay windows — perhaps enabling them to be used as boarding houses.

Above left: Probably originally built as back-to-back houses, these terraces have the character of a small-scale industrial suburb.

Above: Detached villas in spacious grounds are characteristic of the Western Area.

6. Arran Road (Pont yr Arran) Area

Historical Development and Topography

The river Arran formed a definite boundary to the town until the later nineteenth century. Beyond it, development was limited and an agricultural character with large, regular fields prevailed.

The river itself, however, was a major source of industrial water power, and along its banks were a series of mills. These were mainly fulling mills, though there was also a corn mill and a woollen factory by the later eighteenth century. None of these has survived, but there are substantial remains of the fulling mills at the confluence of the Ceunant with the Arran.

Well beyond the limits of the town, the workhouse (now Llwyn View) was built in 1850. It is a reminder of the administrative significance of Dolgellau in the nineteenth century, and one of a number of institutional buildings which marked its status in this period.

Arran Road was also a turnpike (a turnpike gate and cottage are mentioned near the National School in nineteenth-century descriptions of the town), and it provided an axis for linear development at the end of the nineteenth century, when land which had previously formed part of the Llwyn Estate was laid out for development.

Bryn y Gwin is a small estate house on the edge of the town.



In the twentieth century, former agricultural land on the edge of the town proved ripe for development, first with council estates in the inter-war and immediate post-war periods (and the hospital in 1929), and later with private speculative development, in a process which continues.

The Character of Building

There was little development here before the twentieth century. Adjacent to the bridge, a long early nineteenth-century terrace of small houses may have been associated with the textile factory which it faced across the river.

Aran Dale was the mill house associated with the Upper Mill corn mill and was probably a Nannau estate house (it has the characteristic apsidal wing of other houses on the estate). The later development on former Llwyn estate land comprised a series of parallel terraces (and a further row at right-angles to the road), some conceived as symmetrical compositions. Like the Tanws Area on the west bank of the Arran, this development forms a coherent suburb with a strong character.

Away from the main road, the area is dominated by twentieth-century building — the characteristic pairs of inter-war public housing, the longer terraces of the 1950s and 60s, and the detached and semi-detached houses of more recent speculative development.

7. Western Outlying Area

West of Ffordd Bodlondeb, there is a strong break in the underlying historical topography, with a system of rectilinear fields on the upper slopes. The influence of the town remains apparent, not only in the spread of twentieth-century development, but also historically in a series of villas and gentleman's residences. It is notable that those furthest from the town are more closely akin to small country estates — Bryn y Gwin, for example, which had its own estate cottages at the gates, and which was probably also responsible for the picturesque Pandy yr Odyn Cottages.

8. North of the Wnion Area

Historical Development and Topography

The area to the north of the river remained largely undeveloped until the coming of the railway in 1867, though there was a small group of buildings at the bridge head by the early nineteenth century, lost when the railway was put through. These are clearly shown on an engraving for *The Beauties of England and Wales* in 1812, and mapped on a Llwyn Estate survey of 1820. This map, and an earlier survey of Dolwyrch Eogryd (Dolrhyd) also clearly show intermittent buildings hugging Pen y Cefn Road, which was the only road out of Dolgellau to the north in the eighteenth century. The land was broadly divided between the Llwyn and Nannau/Hengwrt estates. To the west of Pen y Cefn road lay Vaughan land which was released for building immediately following the building of the railway. The Llwyn Estate was more reticent: there was little development to the east of the road until the twentieth century. The estate character of this area is signalled by one of the few pre-railway buildings — Coed Fronallt (part of the Llwyn Estate in 1820), with its picturesque detail.

After the coming of the railway, the area changed radically as fields were progressively released for building. At first, development was largely confined to the area west of Pen y Cefn Road, and was mainly in the form of large villas, built as detached houses or pairs. This private development is in contrast to the public building programmes of the twentieth century which dominate the area to the east of Pen y Cefn Road. These include the primary school of 1915, and the council offices of 1953 (an earlier plan for a commission by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott having come to nothing), as well as a council-house building programme begun in the inter-war period. This, together with some limited speculative development, introduced building at a higher density to the east. The town is continuing to expand onto former agricultural land to the north.

The Character of Building

The villas are clearly all individually designed in a range of styles, but with strong common elements: bay windows and broad gables predominate. They may have served as boarding houses as much as private residences, though one was the rectory, built on land acquired for the purpose in 1871.



Picturesque estate cottages at Pandy yr Odyn.



Detached villas are the hallmark of the northern area.



Frondirion was an ambitious planned development of the late nineteenth century; its commanding position close to the railway station and its scale suggest it was built with the holiday trade in mind.

Haulfryn and Frondirion represent a particularly interesting development which was almost certainly intended for the holiday trade: it is a planned development with two matching houses flanking a once gated drive, above which the four-storeyed, gabled range of Frondirion looms. Additional doorways at the back of the terrace seem to suggest that it was built to enable subdivision as apartments. The large bay windows are classic features of the boarding house, and the row commands a fine view over Cader Idris.

The villas are generally set in wooded gardens, with stone gate piers to driveways, and names which are redolent of the picturesque (Coed Cymmer, Coed Celyn, and Haulfryn).

Statement of Significance

Dolgellau is a town like no other. The shape and structure of the town centre takes us straight to its medieval origins. It grew on a series of irregularly shaped plots of land, and buildings cling to their boundaries and once crowded within them. The plots are divided by meandering patterns of lanes and alleys, or separated by open spaces onto which other buildings occasionally encroached. Buildings are often literally shaped to the boundaries of the plots, which have been tenacious in structuring the growth of the town. Even outside the town core, the underlying plot pattern can be discerned as the primary influence on the structure of development, both for the straddling lines of buildings on the west side of the river Arran, and for the dispersed villas that ring the town to the north and south-west. Notwithstanding various nineteenth-century town-planning initiatives, which have also left an important mark on the town, the underlying pattern was never obliterated.

This pattern of alternating open spaces, winding lanes, and plots of land which are sometimes almost entirely girdled with buildings is of fundamental importance to the historic character of the town. Variety in the scale, type and date of building is also central to its historic character, and should be maintained and enhanced. Dolgellau boasts a great range of building types in close

proximity to each other. Small vernacular cottages rub shoulders with substantial polite town houses, and gothic villas overlook terraced rows. This variety was accumulated over several centuries of building and rebuilding, and reveals in considerable detail the developing social structure of the town. Unlike many towns, Dolgellau is still rich in the evidence of its economic drivers. Its origins as a market are betrayed in the extensive open spaces that lie at its heart, and the development of the woollen industry, commerce and tourism from the early nineteenth century can still clearly be traced.

Dolgellau is resolutely a town of stone, but variations in its treatment reflect both the long chronology and broad social range of building. These differences add up to a wide vocabulary of detail, ranging from the limewash and render finishes of early buildings, through to the snecked stone of the later nineteenth century. This variety is important and should be retained and celebrated. A parallel variety in the use of roofing slates has been much diminished, but should be cherished. There is history in every surviving detail — from chimneys to windows and doorsteps — and the survival of so many of these details is a rich resource for understanding the history of the town. These are the qualities which combine to make Dolgellau an urban settlement of such distinctive character.

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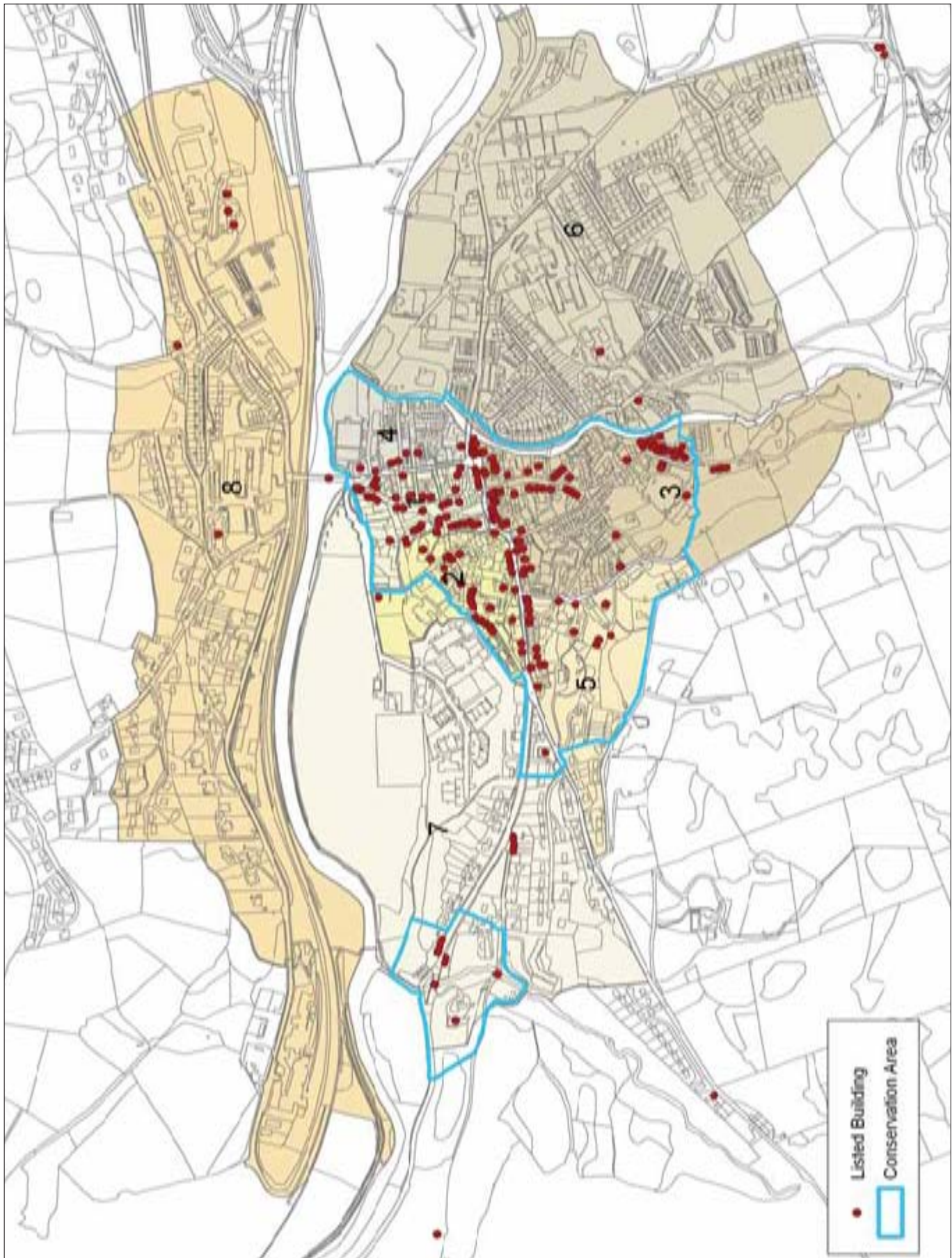
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Footnotes

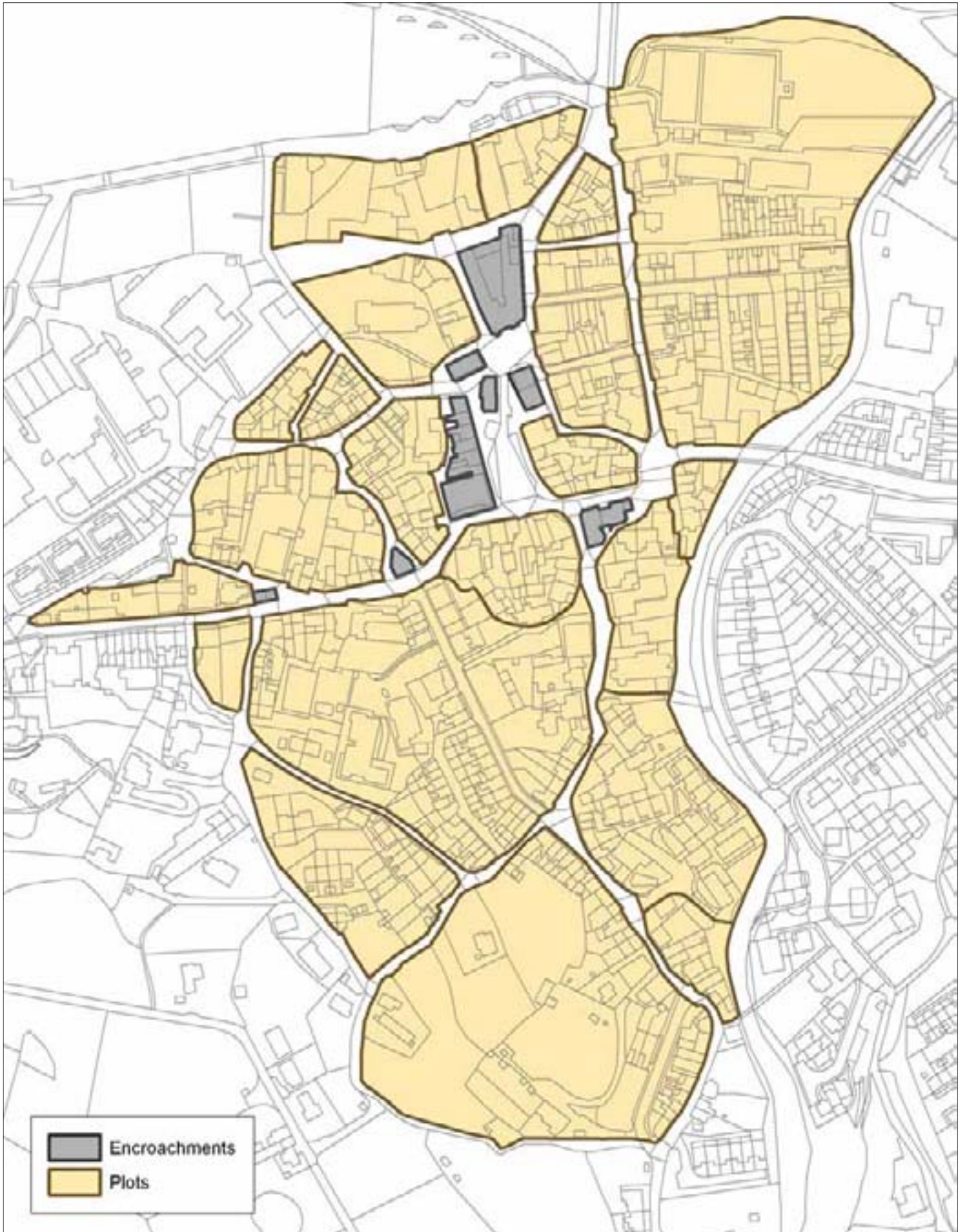
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1 Study Area Showing Conservation Area Boundaries and Distribution of Listed Buildings



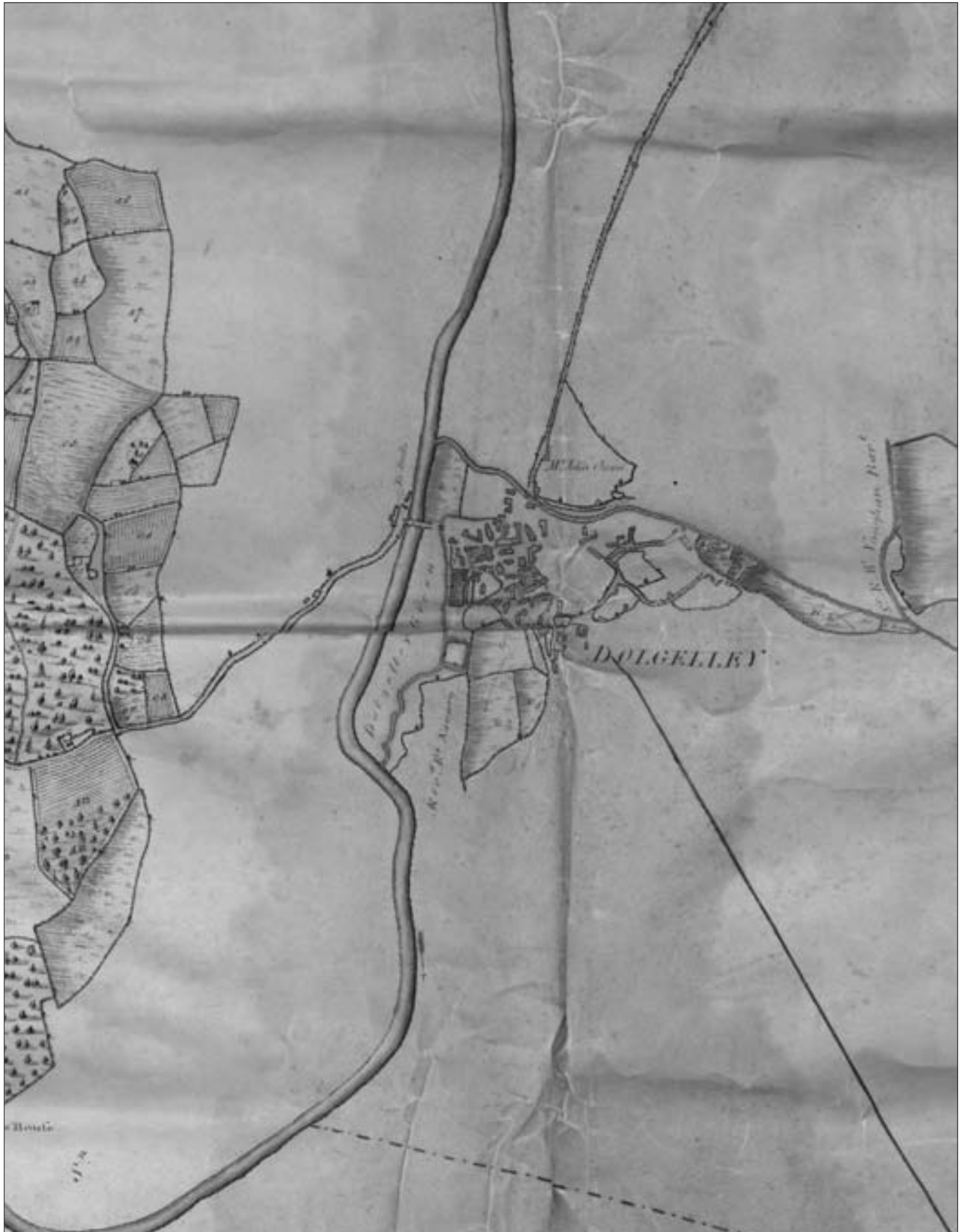
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2 Units of Development: Suggested Plot Structure and Encroachments

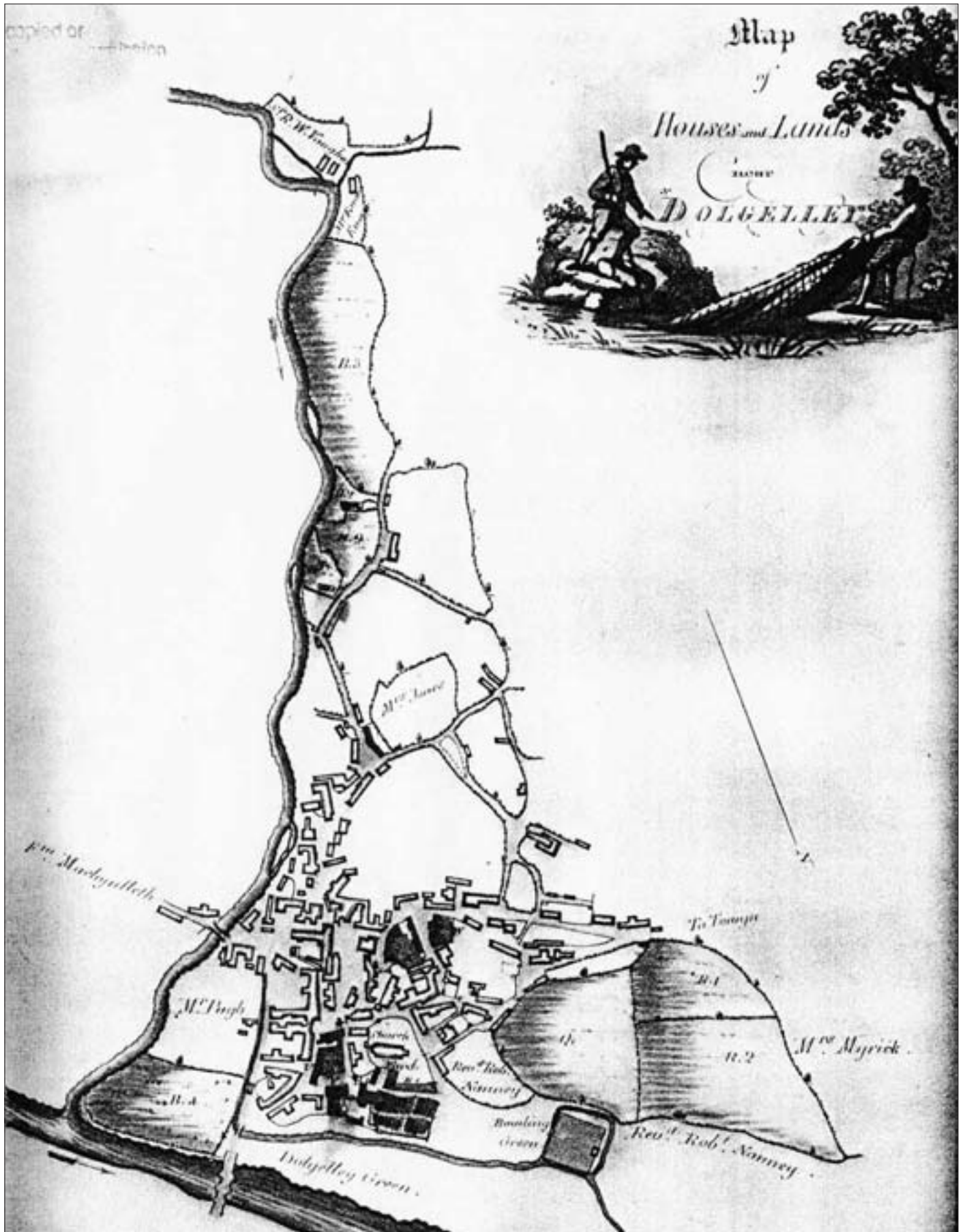


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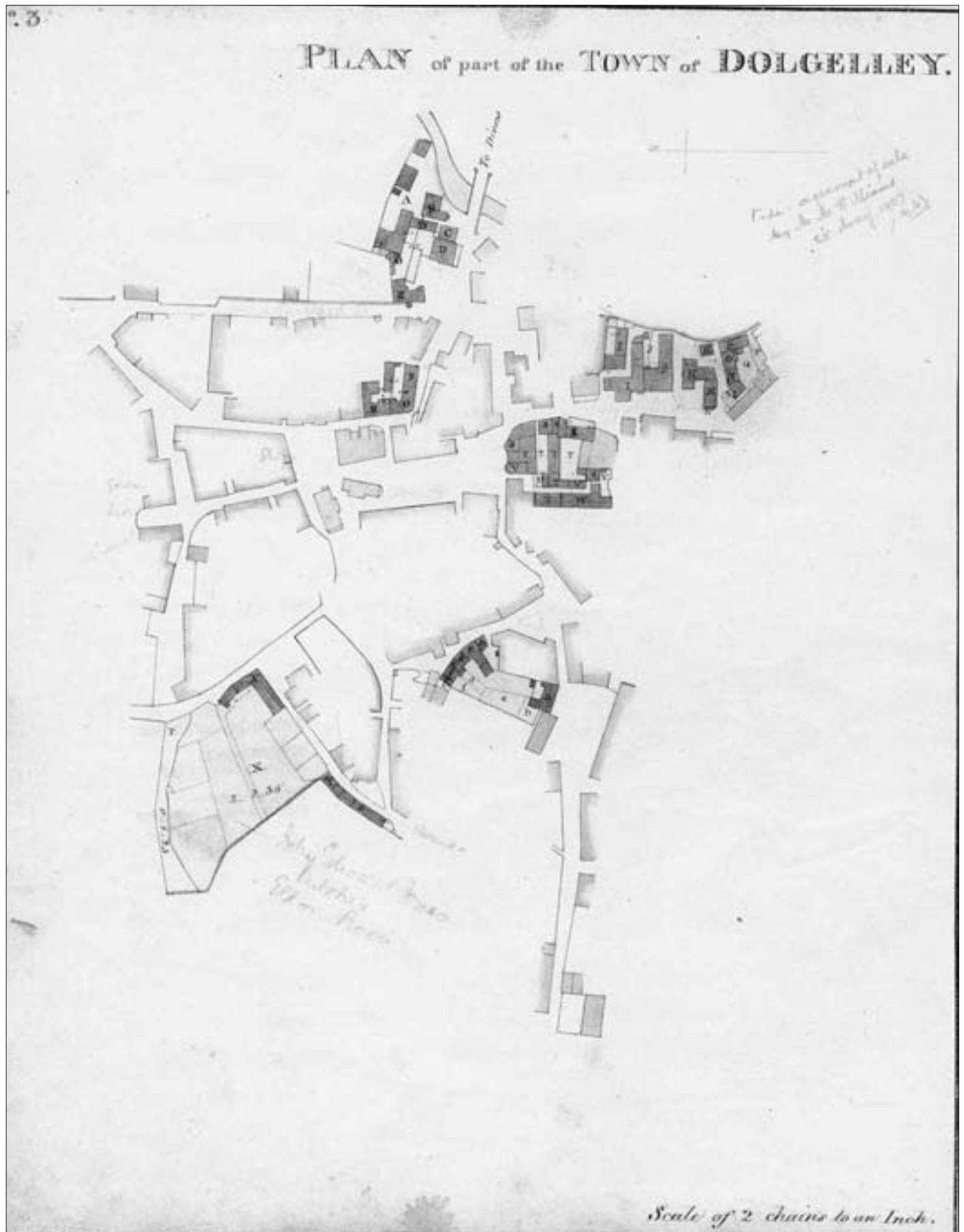
3 Dolgellau in 1760: Map of Several Estates in the County of Merioneth Belonging to Griffith ap Howell Vaughan Esq. (By permission of The National Library of Wales)



4 Dolgellau in 1794: Nannau Estate Map (Gwynedd Archives, ZM/3667)



5 Dolgellau in 1820: Survey and Map of the Llwyn Estate (Gwynedd Archives, ZM/86)



6 Dolgellau and its Environs in 1842: The Tithe Map (By permission of The National Library Wales)

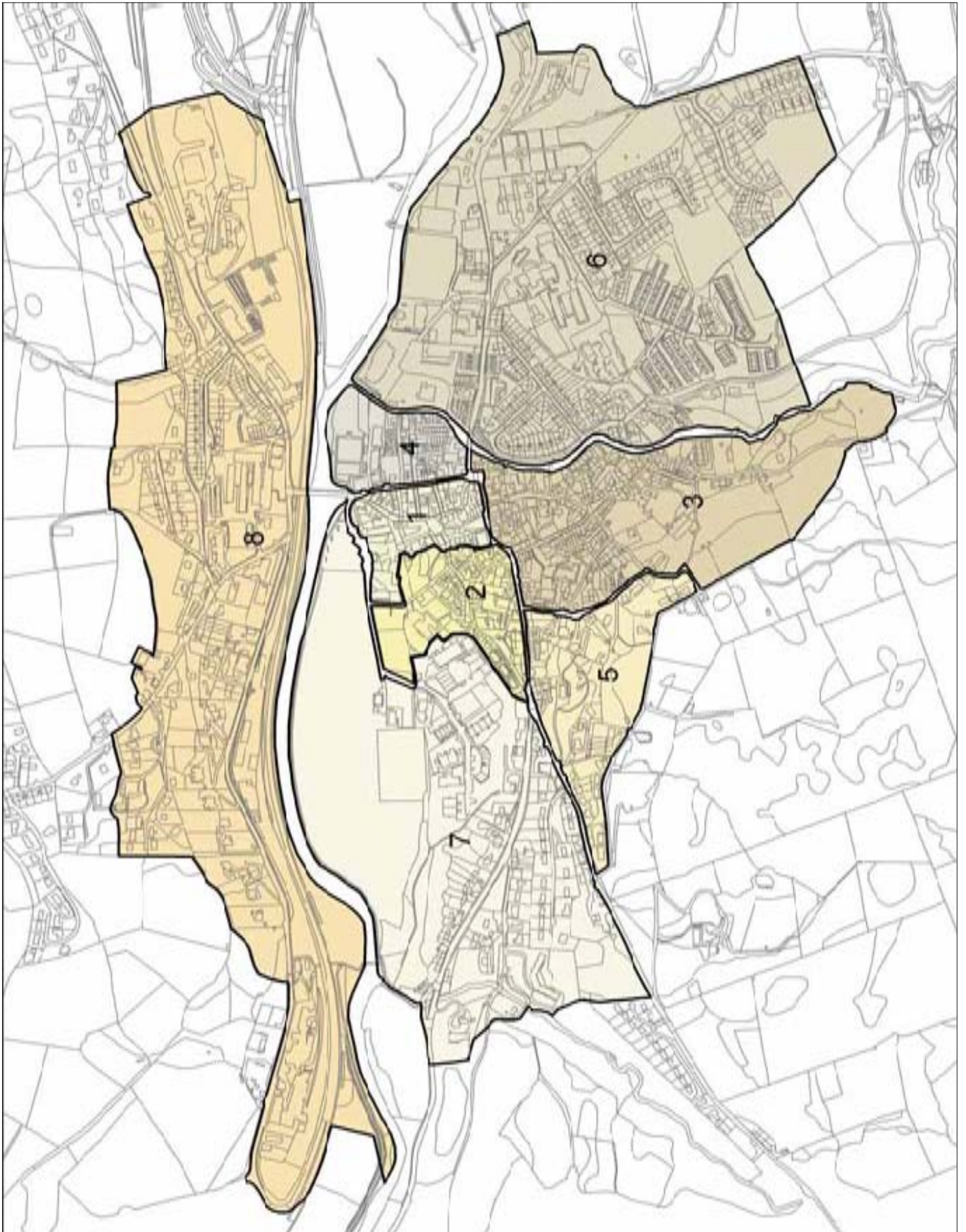


7 Dolgellau in 1881: First Edition Ordnance Survey (1:2,500)

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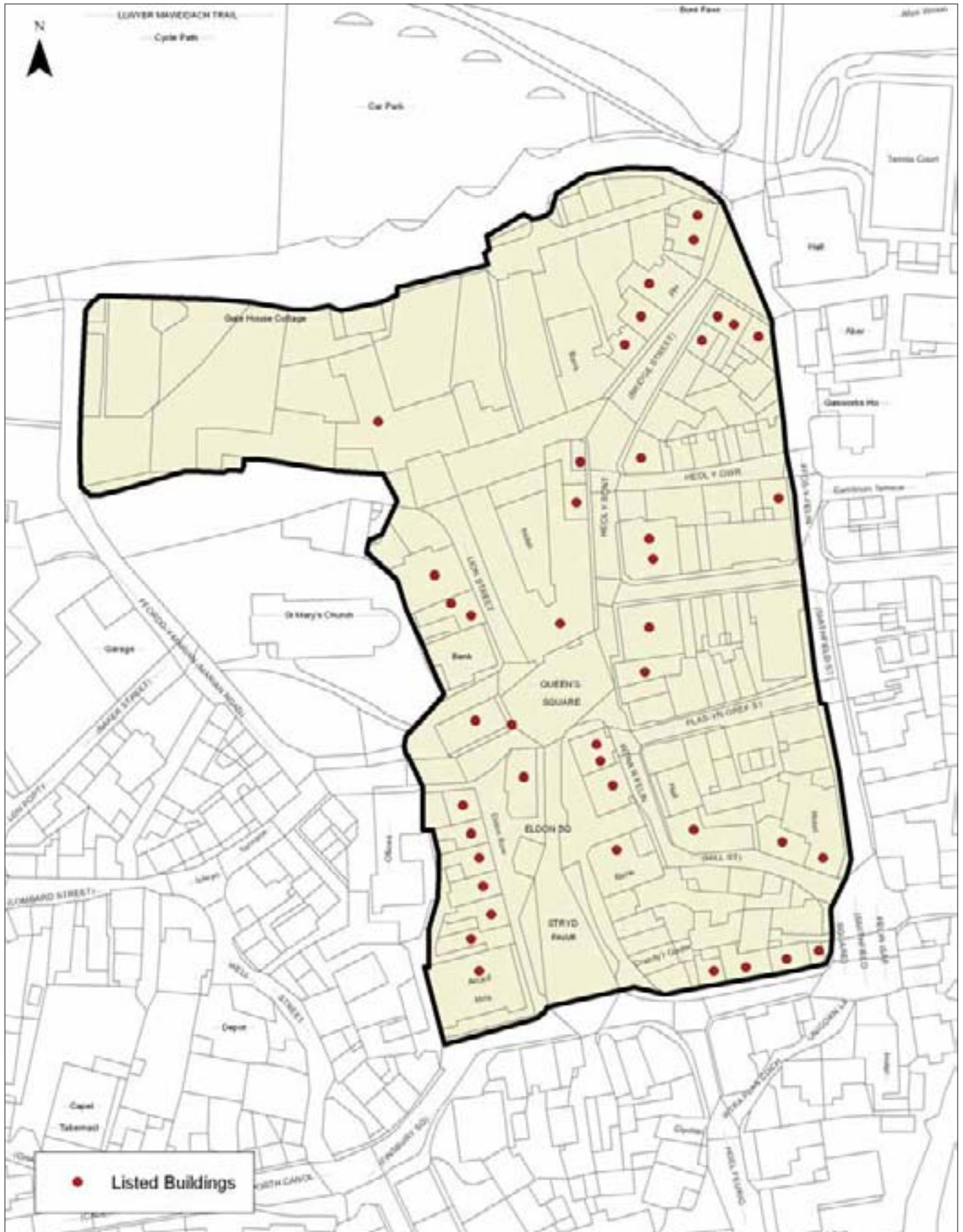


8 All Character Areas



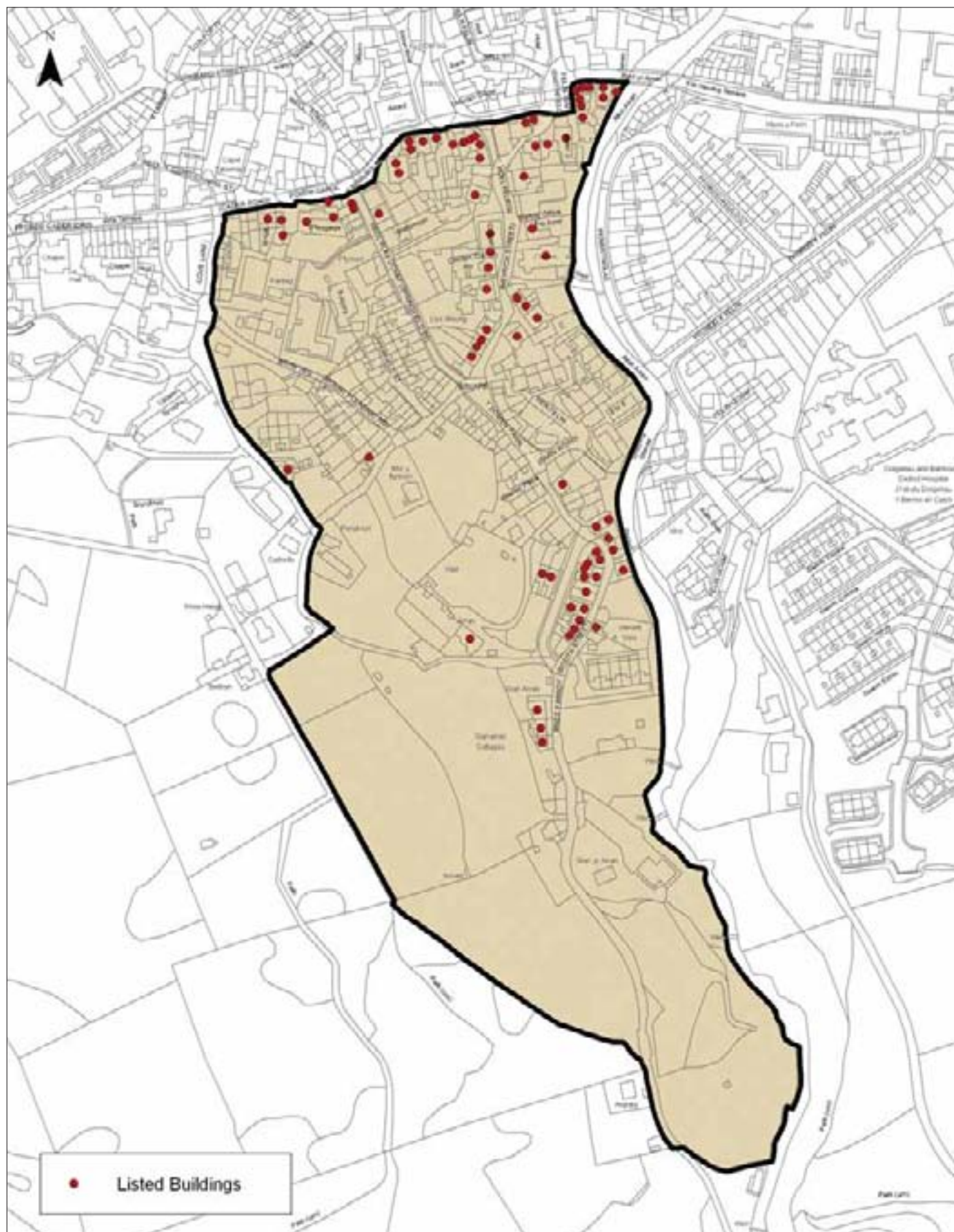
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9 Central Area (1)



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11 South Area (3)



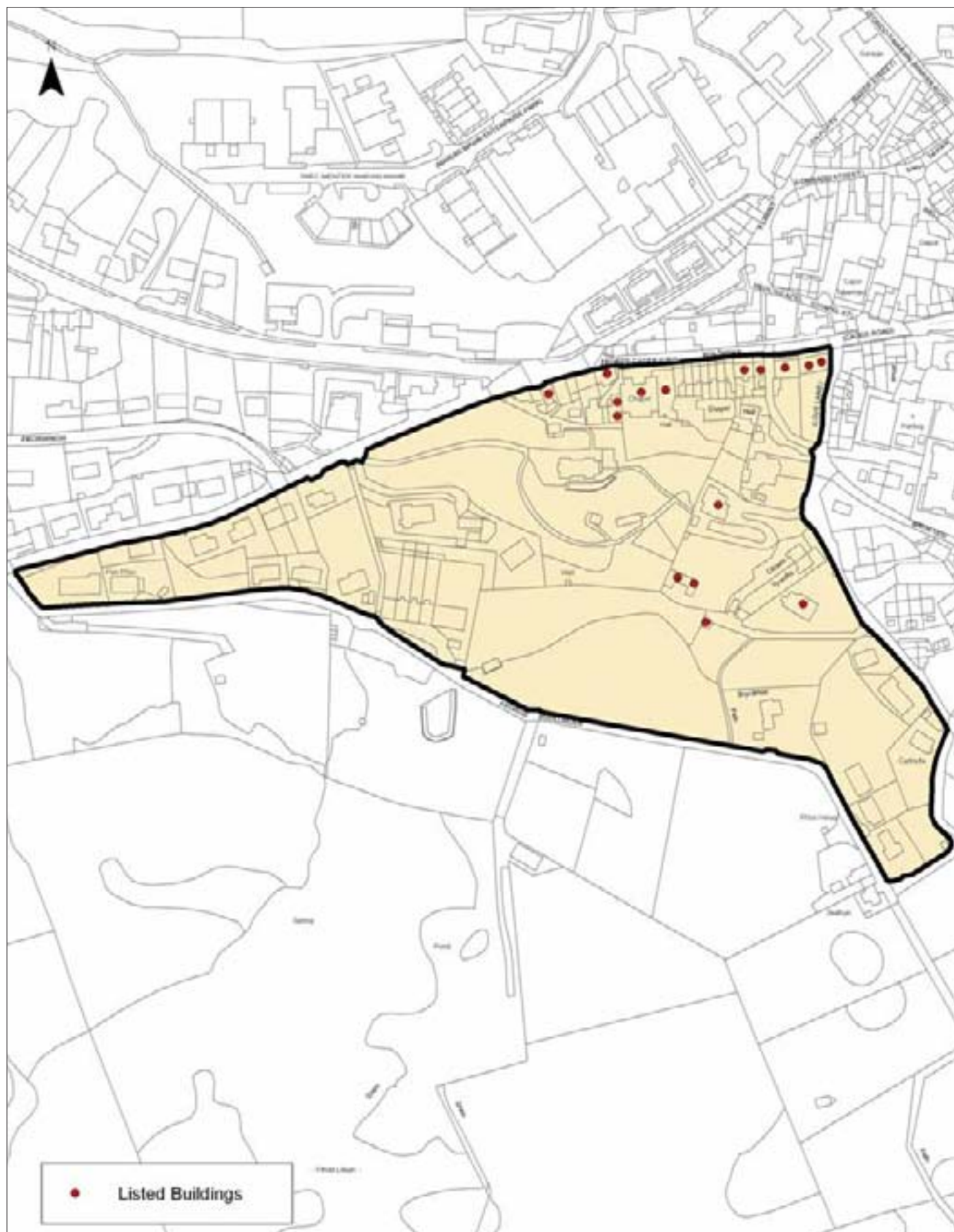
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12 Tanws Area (4)



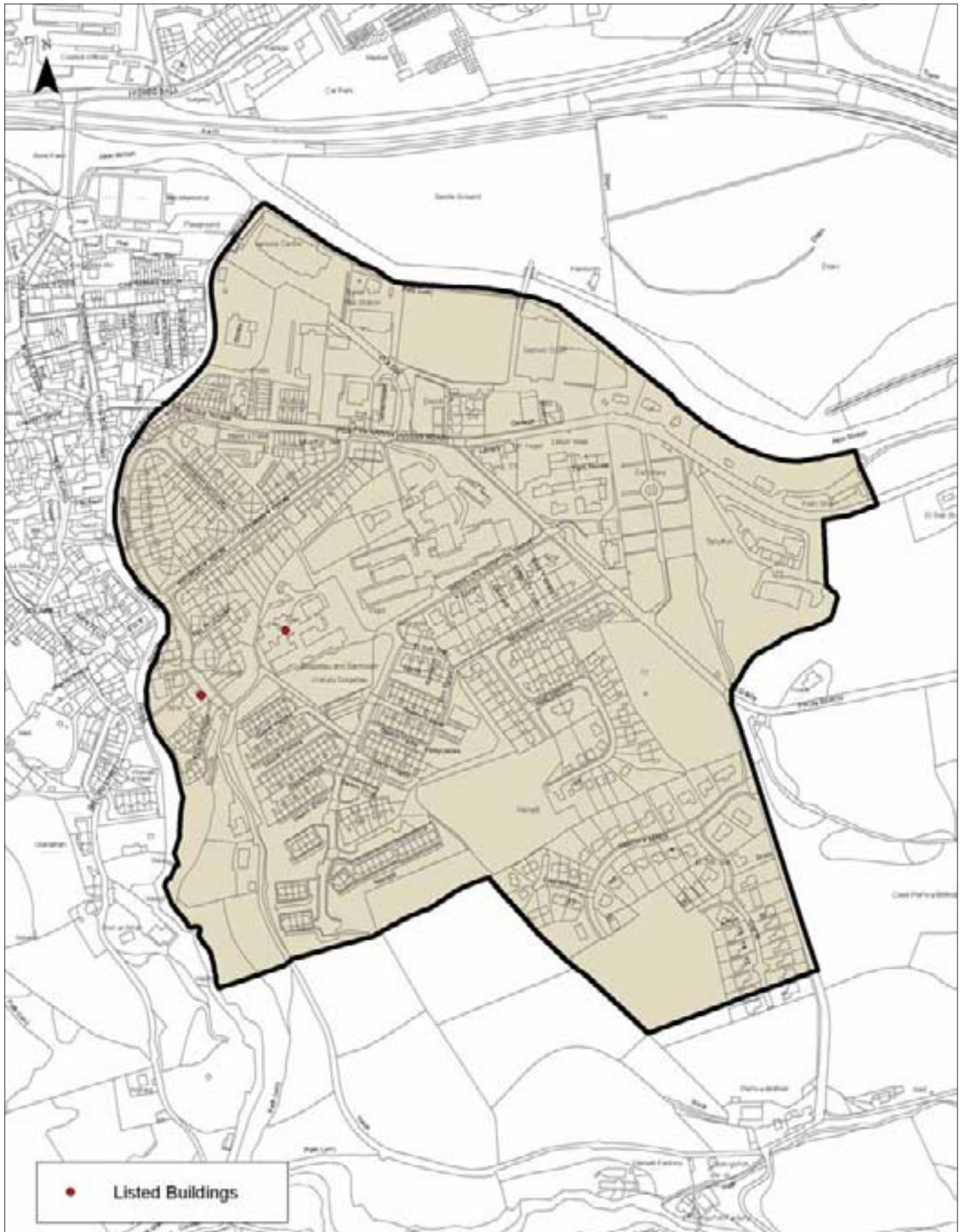
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13 Western Area (5)



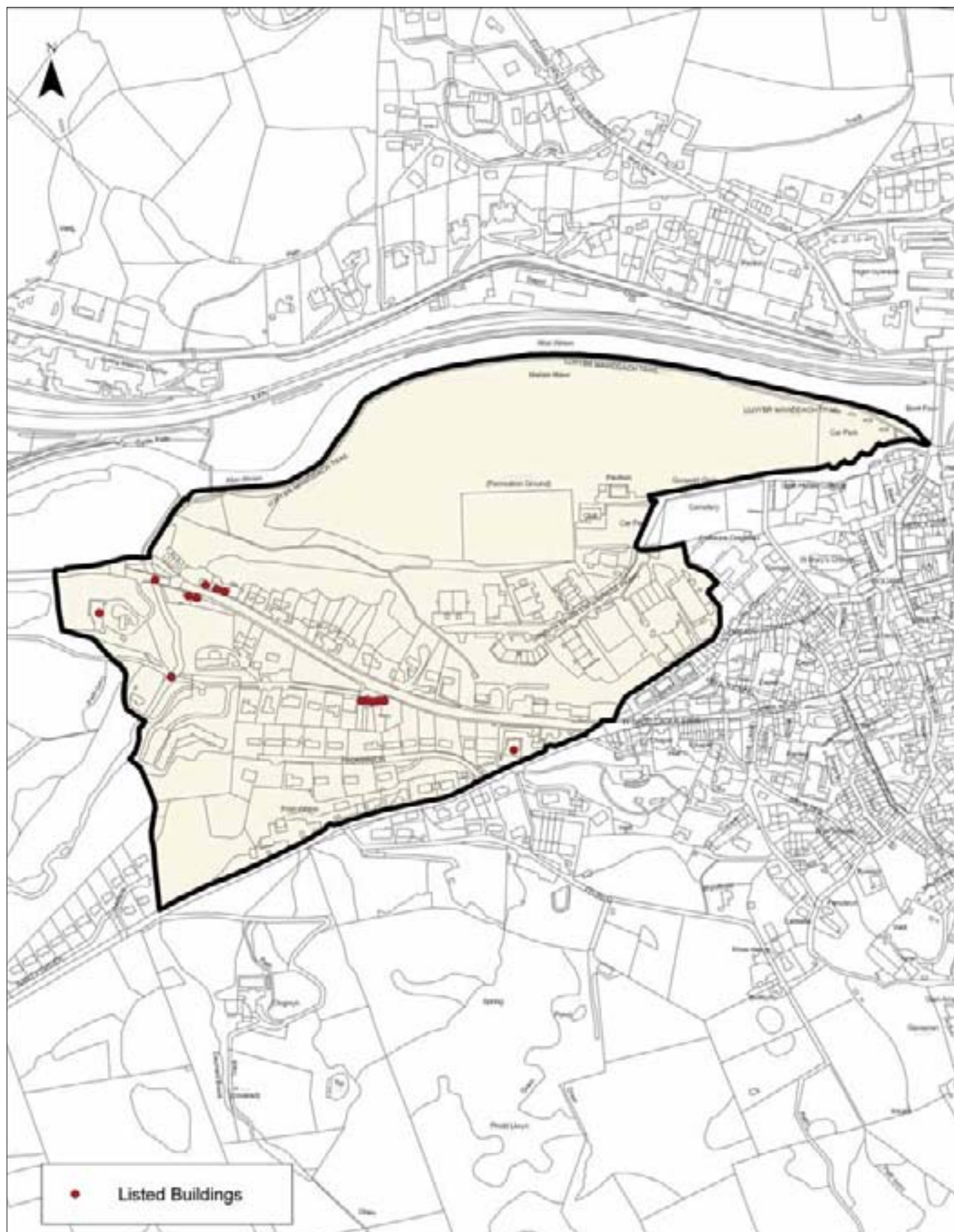
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14 Arran Road (Pont yr Arran) Area (6)



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15 Western Outlying Area (7)



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16 North of the Wnion Area (8)



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Welsh Assembly Government
Plas Carew
Unit 5/7 Cefn Coed
Parc Nantgarw
Cardiff CF15 7QQ