

ABERGYNOLWYN

A character study



Richard Hayman

for

Gwynedd Council
&
Snowdonia National Park Authority

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Crynodeb

Paratowyd astudiaeth o nodweddion trefol Abergynolwyn yn 2017 i ategu'r enwebiad am statws Safle Treftadaeth Byd i Ddiwydiant Llechi Cymru sydd i'w gyflwyno i Gorff Addysgol, Gwyddonol, a Diwylliannol y Cenhedloedd Unedig (UNESCO). Pentref sy'n dyddio i'r bedwaredd ganrif ar bymtheg yn nyffryn Dysynni ym Meirionnydd yw Abergynolwyn, ac fe'i codwyd i greu cartrefi i chwarelwyr chwarel Bryn Eglwys. Mae'n sefyll yn agos i Reilffordd Tal-y-llyn, a wasanaethai'r chwarel a'r pentref.

Mae'r adroddiad yn amlinellu hanes y gwaith chwarela yn yr ardal a datblygiad Abergynolwyn a Rheilffordd Tal-y-llyn. Mae'r astudiaeth nodweddion yn edrych ar y patrwm anheddu a'i berthynas â seilwaith y ffyrdd a ffermydd cyn-ddiwydiannol. Gan edrych ar dai diwydiannol yn bennaf, ond gan gynnwys adeiladau masnachol, diwylliannol a chrefyddol hefyd, mae'n trafod dylanwad yr economi lleol, dyheadau diwylliannol, adeiledd y gymdeithas a defnydd deunyddiau adeiladu, bob un ohonynt wedi cyfrannu at gymeriad arbennig treftadaeth adeiledig Abergynolwyn. Tanlinellir amrywiaeth cymeriad hanesyddol y pentref drwy nodi ardaloedd sydd â chymeriad gwahanol.

Daeth Abergynolwyn i fodolaeth ar ôl agor Chwarel Bryn Eglwys ym 1844 a chafwyd cyfnod o ddatblygu dwys rhwng 1864 a dechrau'r 1880au. Dyma gyfnod ffyniannus yn yr economi lleol, a ddilynwyd gan ddirywiad hir, heb fawr ddim adeiladu newydd, ac mae hyn wedi sicrhau bod cymeriad pedwaredd ganrif ar bymtheg y dref wedi parhau. Parau o dai a rhesi byr yw'r tai cynnar, ond ar ôl buddsoddi mawr yn y chwarel a'r pentref o 1864 ymlaen cafodd rhesi o dai teras eu codi, rhai wedi'u seilio'n fras ar waith dylunio pensaer o Fanceinion, James Stevens. Daeth capeli, eglwys, ysgol a siopau i'r dref, a oedd wedyn yn gymuned gyflawn, o safbwynt economi a diwylliant.

Mae'r deunyddiau adeiladu'n gwneud cyfraniad pwysig at gymeriad y pentref, lle mae dilyniant o ddefnyddio meini o'r maes i lechi gwastraff o'r chwareli yn amlwg. Mae'r cynnydd yn ansawdd y tai diwydiannol i'w weld yn glir hefyd yn y datblygiad o fythynnod unllawr i dai dau-lawr mawr.

Tynnir y themâu amrywiol at ei gilydd i ddangos bod Abergynolwyn wedi cadw cymeriad cryf a neilltuol sy'n deillio o'r bedwaredd ganrif ar bymtheg a hynny ar sail cyfuniad unigryw o dopograffi, hanes economaidd a chymdeithasol, a'r adnoddau naturiol lleol y codwyd ei adeiladau ohonyn nhw. Mae'r adroddiad yn gorffen gydag argymhellion ar ragoriaethau dynodi Ardal Gadwraeth.

Summary

An urban-character study of Abergynolwyn was prepared in 2017 in support of the Wales Slate World Heritage Nomination to be submitted to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). Abergynolwyn is a nineteenth-century village in the Dysynni valley in Merioneth, which was built to house quarrymen at Bryn Eglwys slate quarry, and stands close to the narrow-gauge Talyllyn Railway, which served both the quarry and the village.

The report outlines the history of quarrying in the locality and the development of Abergynolwyn and the Talyllyn Railway. The character study examines the pattern of settlement and its relationship to its existing infrastructure of roads and pre-industrial farmsteads. Based mainly on industrial housing, but also encompassing commercial, cultural and religious buildings, it discusses the influence of the local economy, cultural aspirations, social structure and the use of building materials, all of which have contributed to the special character of Abergynolwyn's built heritage. The variety of historic character within the village is highlighted by the identification of separate character areas.

Abergynolwyn came into existence after the opening of Bryn Eglwys Quarry in 1844 and there was an intense period of development from 1864 to the early 1880s. It represents a boom period in the local economy, following which there was a prolonged decline, with little new building, which has ensured that the town retains its nineteenth-century character. Early housing is comprised of pairs and short rows of houses, whereas after major investment in the quarry and village from 1864 rows of terraced houses were built, some of them based loosely on designs by a Manchester architect, James Stevens. The town acquired chapels, a church, school and shops, becoming a fully-formed community, both economically and culturally.

Building materials make an important contribution to the character of the village, where a progression from field stone to the use of slate waste from the quarry is clearly visible. Progress in the quality of industrial housing is also clearly evident in the development from single-storey cottages to large two-storey houses.

The various themes are drawn together to show that Abergynolwyn retains a strong and distinctive nineteenth-century character based on its unique combination of topography, economic and social history, and the local natural resources with which its buildings were constructed. The report concludes with recommendations on the merits of designation of Conservation Area status.

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Contents

Summaries

1 Aims of the study	1
2 Introduction	1
3 Historical background	2
4 Character of building	9
4.1 Building style and detail	9
4.2 Building materials	16
5 Character Areas	21
5.1 Pandy and main road, including railway incline	21
5.2 Heol Llanegryn and Heol y Dwr / Water Street	23
5.3 Heol Tanybryn	25
5.4 Cwrt	25
5.5 St David's church	27
5.6 Bron y Gader, Tan y Fedw and Maes Meillion	27
6 Statement of significance	28
7 Recommendations	29
8 References	31
Appendix 1: listed buildings in Abergynolwyn	33

List of illustrations

- Fig 1 Location plan
- Fig 2 Abergynolwyn village, viewed from the north
- Fig 3 Plan of Abergynolwyn village, c1864
- Fig 4 Elevations for terraced houses by James Stevens of Manchester, 1864
- Fig 5 Cross-sections of proposed houses, drawn by James Stevens of Manchester
- Fig 6 Plan of Abergynolwyn village, after 1878
- Fig 7 The settlement at Cwrt
- Fig 8 Inclined plane at the south end of the village
- Fig 9 Abergynolwyn looking south in the early twentieth century
- Fig 10 Outbuilding behind the Railway Inn
- Fig 11 The Railway Inn, with farm buildings behind
- Fig 12 The altered former farm building of Pandy Farm
- Fig 13 Meirion House and Ivy Cottage
- Fig 14 Pandy Square
- Fig 15 Heol Llanegryn
- Fig 16 Numbers 13-24 Heol y Dwr / Water Street
- Fig 17 Heol Tanybryn
- Fig 18 Two late-nineteenth century houses on the main road
- Fig 19 Line of the former railway between Heol Llanegryn and Heol y Dwr / Water Street
- Fig 20 Capel Jerusalem

- Fig 21 Field-stone wall
- Fig 22 Slate wall in Heol Tanybryn
- Fig 23 Abergynolwyn viewed from the Talyllyn Railway
- Fig 24 Roof slates
- Fig 25 Garden wall with a coping course of broken pieces of quartz
- Fig 26 Gate piers of sawn slate slabs
- Fig 27 Map of character areas
- Fig 28 Buildings around Pandy Farm
- Fig 29 Capel Saron on the main road
- Fig 30 Looking east along the main road from the centre of the village
- Fig 31 Egryn Cottages and Cwrt Congregational Chapel
- Fig 32 Heol y Dwr / Water Street
- Fig 33 Heol Tanybryn
- Fig 34 Line of railway at rear of Heol Tanybryn
- Fig 35 Houses in Cwrt, viewed from the south west across Nant Gwernol
- Fig 36 Church of St David
- Fig 37 View looking north west over Abergynolwyn
- Fig 38 Proposed Conservation Area boundary
- Fig 39 Listed buildings in Abergynolwyn

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I Aims of the study

Historic character confers identity, creates a sense of belonging and contributes to the quality of the places where we live, work and visit. It can also be an asset for economic vitality and regeneration. Protecting and sustaining local character effectively requires a sound evidence base that can inform regeneration activity, conservation, planning and design, and support decisions about conservation, management and the accommodation of change.

Developing character studies for settlements helps provide a robust evidence-base for local planning policies and will provide a key element of support for managing these proposed settlements for the future.

The immediate purpose of this study is to provide supporting evidence for one aspect of the forthcoming Wales Slate World Heritage Site nomination. The nomination will seek to convey the important value that settlements play in the outstanding universal value of the site. Abergynolwyn is one of the settlements selected for study, because it has its own distinctive character that reveals specific aspects of the development of the slate industry and the economy, society and culture that it produced.

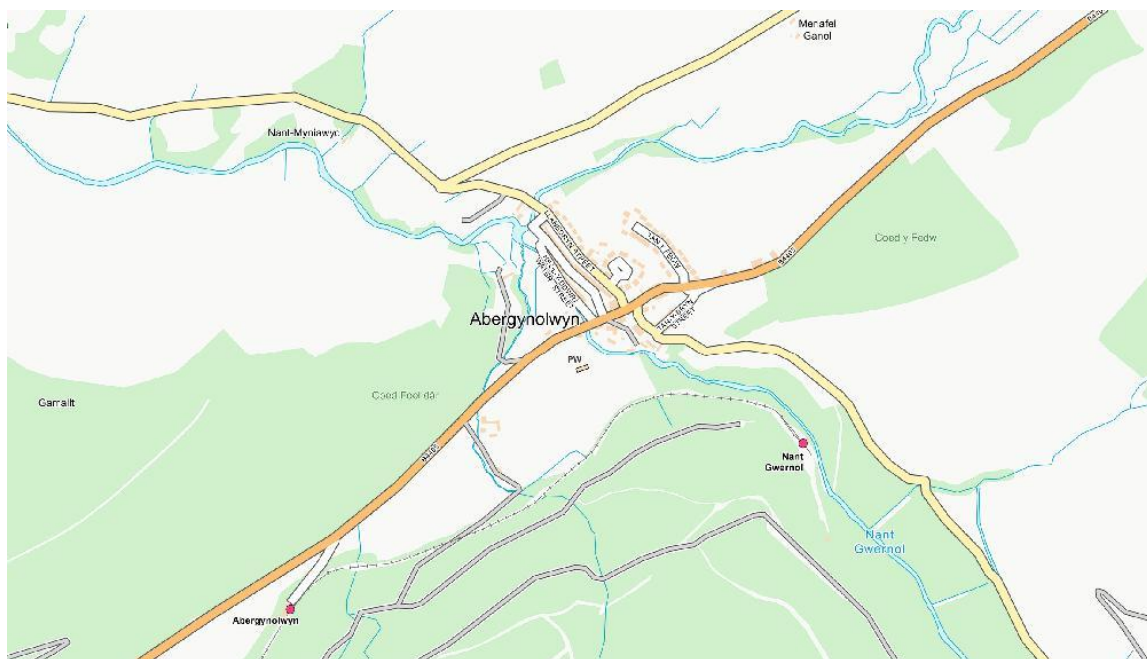


Fig 1 Location map

2 Introduction

Abergynolwyn is a small village in the otherwise sparsely populated valley of Afon Dysynni in Merioneth, approximately 7.5 miles (12 kilometres) inland from the coast at Tywyn. It is within Snowdonia National Park. The village occupies the narrow valley floor on the south side of the river, and is largely confined to the east side of one of its tributaries, Nant Gwernol (fig 1). The valley side rises steeply on the south side, defining the southern extent of the settlement (fig 2). The main road through the village runs from Talyllyn, at the foot of Cadair Idris, down the valley to Tywyn. At centre of the village is a crossroads, from which

a road leads north over the Dysynni to Llanfihangel-y-Pennant, and a lane leads up the hill to the south to Bryn Eglwys.

On the hillside above the village runs the Talylyn Railway, the first of the narrow-gauge railways of Wales to be preserved. There is no quarry within sight of the village. The village was built to accommodate workmen at Bryn Eglwys Quarry, which is approximately 1.4 miles (2.2 kilometres) south-east of the village, although the site is now largely forested. Since the slate was mined rather than quarried, slate waste tips do not dominate the landscape in the manner of many other quarrying landscapes of north Wales.



Fig 2 Abergynolwyn village, viewed from the north.

3 Historical background

There was no village at Abergynolwyn before the opening of the Bryn Eglwys Slate Quarry, which was begun and expanded from the 1840s. The Tithe survey of Llanfihangel y Pennant parish, dated 1838, reveals only two farmsteads on the floor of the valley by the confluence of Afon Dysynni and Nant Gwernol. Pandy was an 88-acre farmstead, its name and proximity to Nant Gwernol suggesting that there was at some time a fulling mill here. The other farmstead was 'Abergynolwyn', of 23 acres, which was later converted to become the Railway Inn.

A fifty-year lease for quarrying at Bryn Eglwys was signed by John Pugh in 1844. The scale of early operations was inhibited by the problem of transportation, however. Slate quarries of this period were often served by horse-drawn railways, without which it was difficult to transport large quantities of a bulky and heavy product. In the early decades of quarrying at Bryn Eglwys the slates were transported by packhorse to Aberdyfi, and output was consequently modest.

Quarrymen working for Pugh appear to have lodged mainly in local farms, and in cottages built in the Gwernol valley close to the quarry. During this period, however, Abergynolwyn began to emerge as a village. Capel Saron, a Wesleyan Methodist chapel, was said to have

been founded in 1835 (although no chapel is marked here on the 1838 Tithe map of the parish). The L-shaped row of houses, known as Pandy Square, on the former Pandy Farm and a pair of cottages at the road junction in the centre of the village had been built by the early 1860s. The village also had a saw mill and a smithy. By this time the former 'Abergynolwyn' farm had become the Red Lion Inn, although the building itself is puzzling. It appears to stand in the former farm yard, suggesting that it was built as public house in the mid nineteenth century; but as late as 1963 it had a cross-passage plan indicative of typical regional storeyed farmhouse.

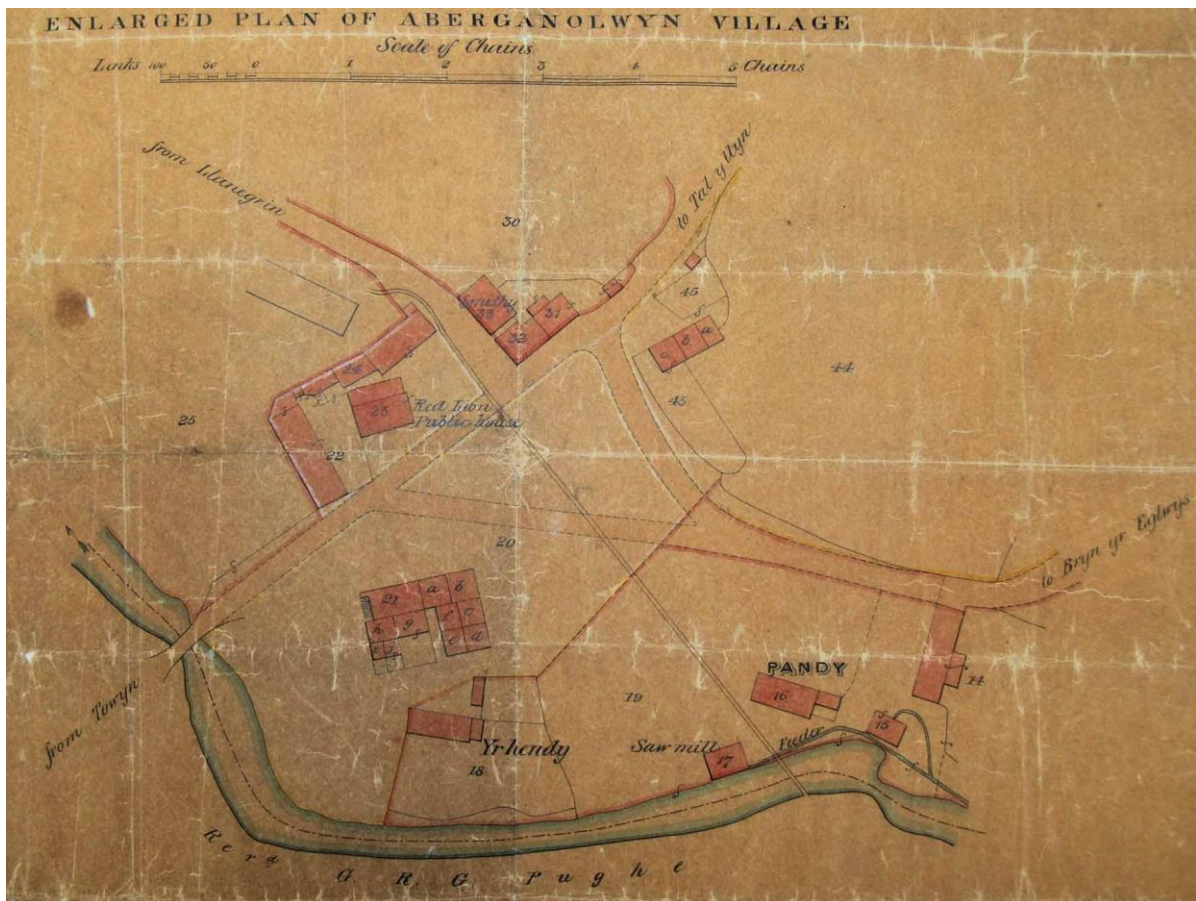


Fig 3 Plan of Abergynolwyn village, c1864, before the Abergynolwyn Slate Company houses were built. (© Talyllyn Railway Archives)

In 1864 Bryn Eglwys Quarry was purchased by William McConnel (1809-1902) and his brother Thomas. The McConnel family was well established in industry as owners of a cotton-spinning mill in Ancoats, Manchester, but disruption in the supply of cotton caused by the American Civil War (1861-1865) encouraged them to diversify their business interests. The McConnells' 1864 invested in the expansion of Bryn Eglwys Quarry and traded as the Abergynolwyn Slate Company from 1867. They also promoted the building of a railway for transportation of the slate. The Talyllyn Railway Company was formed in 1865 and the line to the quarry, passing above Abergynolwyn village, was built from the coast at Tywyn and opened in 1866. It was the first of the slate railways in North Wales to be designed for steam locomotives from the outset, and from December 1866 was the first of the narrow-gauge railways in North Wales to run passenger services. By 1873 they had also opened a water-powered mill in Abergynolwyn for sawing slates for school use, on the site of a saw mill, marked on the map of c1864, and other buildings at Pandy Farm.

There were 260 employees at the quarry in 1879, a significant increase in employment that demanded new housing. There were barracks close to the quarry for workmen to lodge during the working week, but the main focus of development became the village of Abergynolwyn, where the proximity of the Talyllyn Railway made it possible for men to commute to the quarry.

Drawings for houses were prepared by James Stevens of Manchester in 1864. The general characteristics and individual details of the designs, including wedge lintels and overhanging eaves, are seen in houses throughout the village. Two drawings show a terrace of six houses in a Georgian style with small-pane sash windows, panelled front doors, boarded rear doors, and openings under wedge lintels (fig 4). Numbers 13-18 Heol y Dwr / Water Street were built very close to this specific design and their interiors correspond with interior drawings (fig 5).

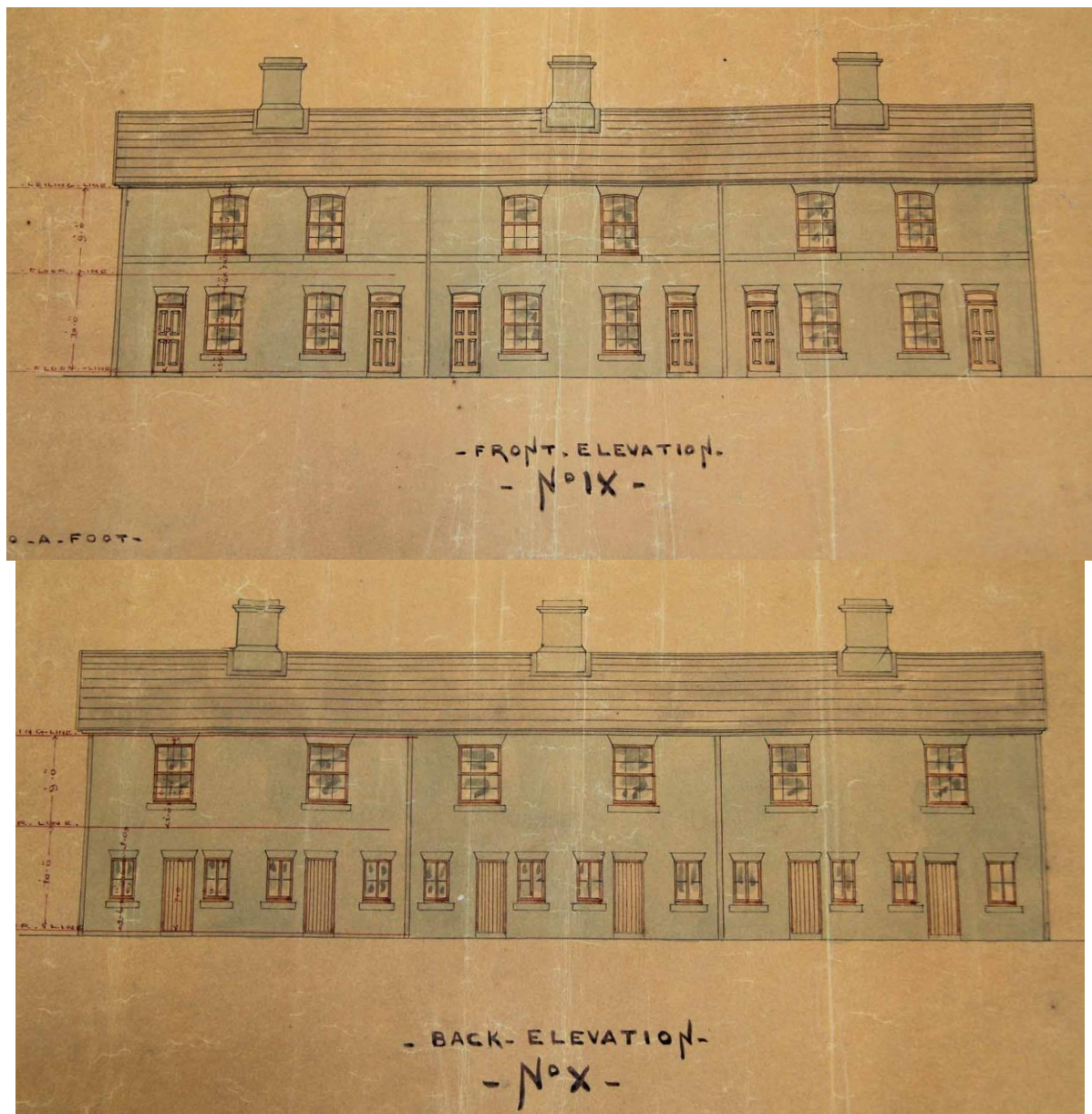


Fig 4 Elevations for houses drawn by James Stevens of Manchester. (© Talyllyn Railway Archives)

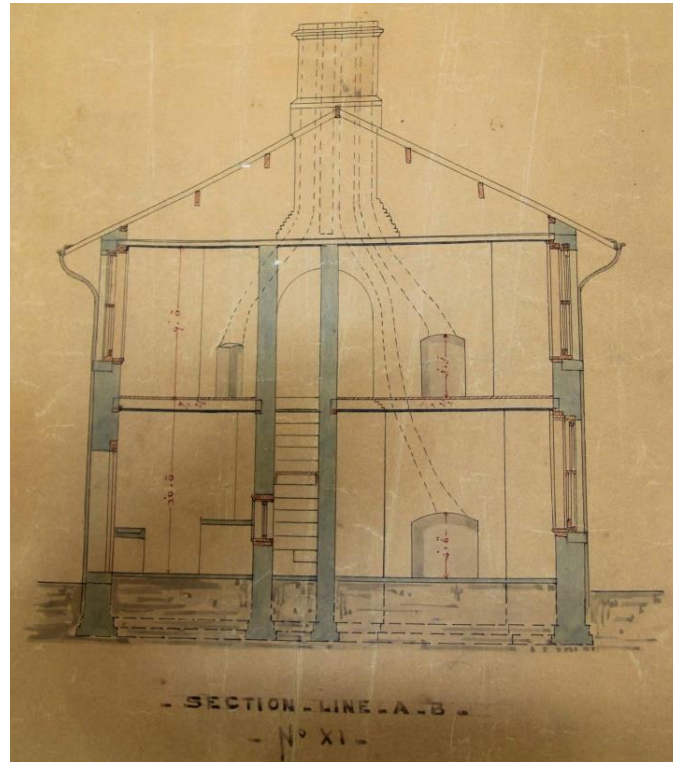


Fig 5 Cross-sections of proposed houses, showing one with transverse stair (13-18 Heol y Dwr / Water Street) and one with an attic storey and overhanging eaves (19-24 Heol y Dwr / Water Street), drawn by James Stevens of Manchester. (© Talyllyn Railway Archives)

The pace of development was rapid. The first houses to be built by the company, in the period 1865-68, were the two terraces of twelve single-storey houses on Heol Llanegryn, the second row laid out on a slightly dog-leg alignment. Heol y Dwr / Water Street, between Heol Llanegryn and Nant Gwernol, was built in 1868-9 and is comprised of three separate blocks of six, six and twelve houses. Heol Tanybryn, a street with terraced houses on both sides, was begun in 1870 (fig 6).

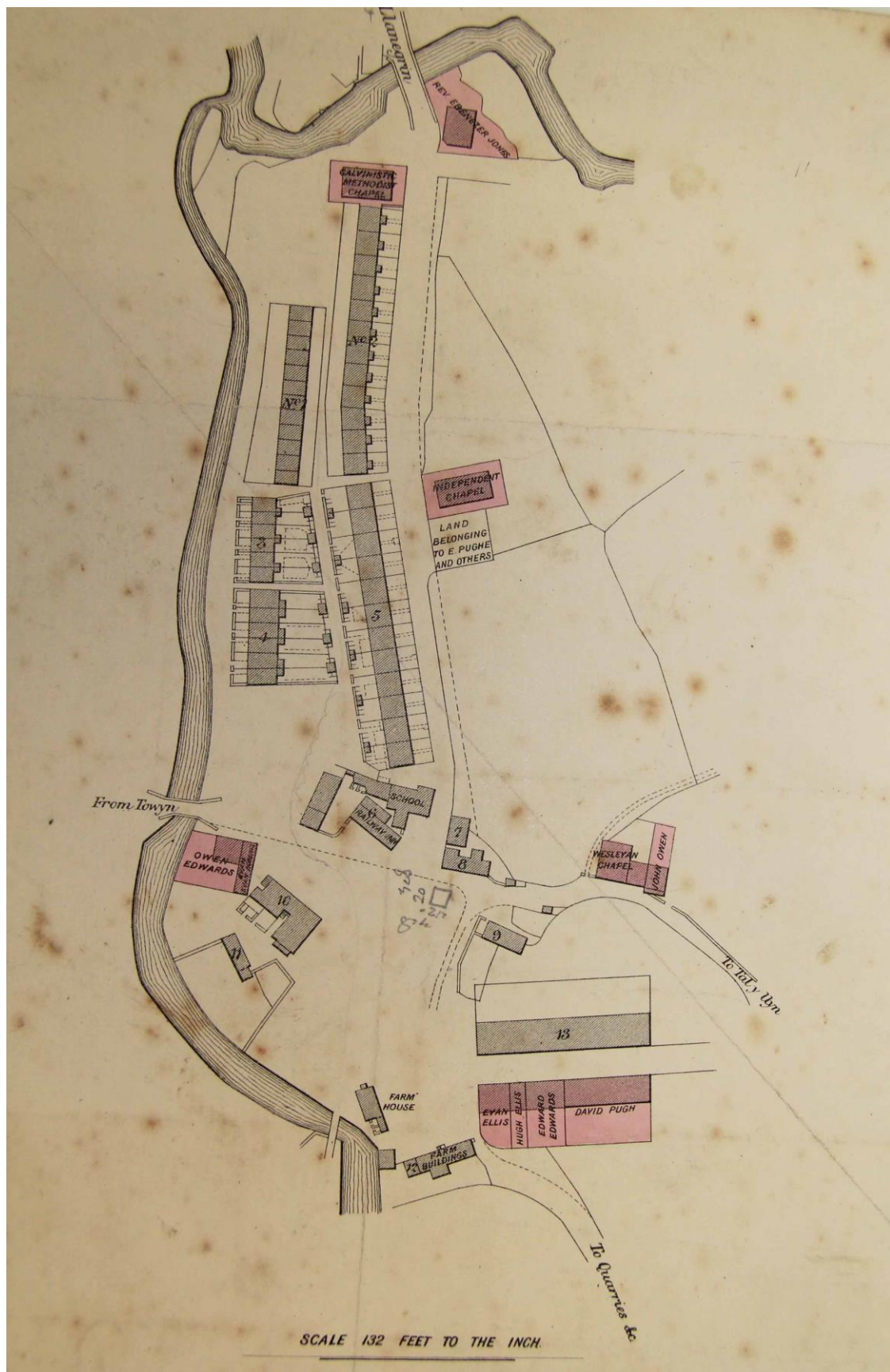


Fig 6 Plan of Abergynolwyn village, after 1878 when Cwrt and Jerusalem chapels were built. Buildings shaded pink were not owned by the Abergynolwyn Slate Company. (© Talylllyn Railway Archives)

The 1889 Ordnance Survey also depicts a separate, probably speculative, development at Cwrt, at the north end of the village and on the north side of the river. It was made up of short terraces in a loop of the river (fig 7). The map also shows an extensive area of allotments on the east side of Heol Llanegryn.

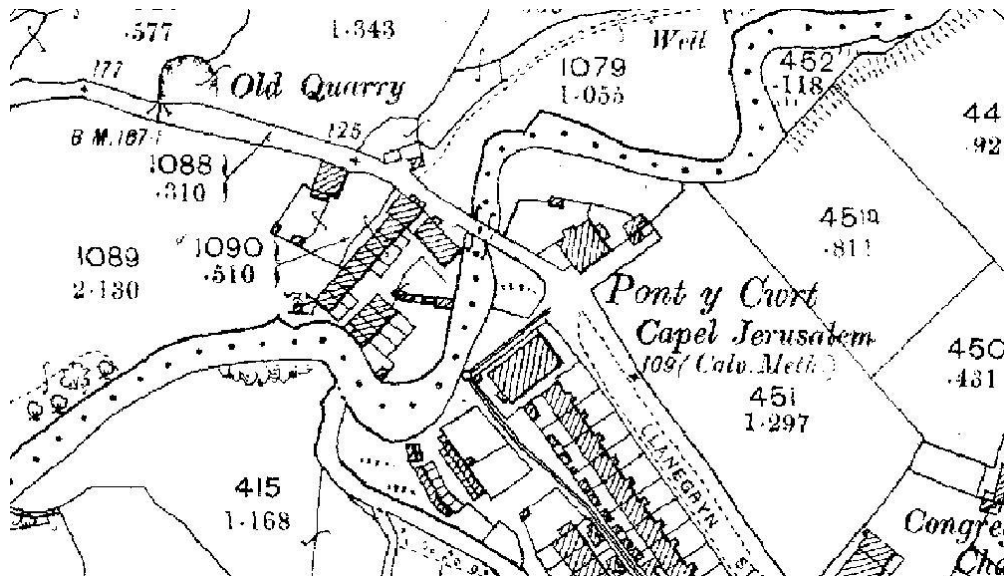


Fig 7 The settlement at Cwrt, on a constricted site on the north side of the river.

The village had become established as the focus of community life and attracted the institutional buildings characteristic of the period. The Wesleyans built Capel Saron in 1870, and in 1878 there were two new chapels – Cwrt Congregational Chapel, and Capel Jerusalem for the Calvinistic Methodists. The arrival of an Anglican Church was belated. In 1879-80 the church of St David was built by the diocesan architect, Henry Kennedy, probably at the expense of the Abergynolwyn Slate Company, or perhaps William McConnel himself. The Red Lion Inn was renamed the Railway Inn, and beside it stood an early school, probably housed in an old farm building. It was superseded by a new school in 1883, built by the local school board that had been set up under the auspices of the 1870 Elementary Education Act.

Major investment in the quarry, and by extension the village, was relatively short-lived. The company went into voluntary liquidation in 1883, when the McConnel brothers purchased the leases and part of the village. However there was no significant further investment in the quarry or the village. Only single houses and pairs of houses were built in the village in the late-nineteenth century.

Abergynolwyn was unusual in being served by a branch of the Talyllyn railway. An inclined plane lowered wagons from the railway to the level of the village, the original purpose of which was to supply slate blocks to the mill (figs 8, 9). The line was then extended to company houses in the village, following a route between the backs of Heol Llanegryn and Heol y Dwr / Water Street. By means of turntables, a further short branch was built beside Capel Jerusalem at the north end of Heol Llanegryn and another branch was built along the rear of the north row of Tanybryn. Railways allowed coal to be delivered by wagon to the backs of the houses. Night soil from the privies at the backs of the gardens is said to have been shovelled on to trucks and carried away for disposal by the railway.

Bryn Eglwys Quarry closed in 1909, but the business, including the railway, was purchased by Henry Haydn Jones in 1911, and re-opened, albeit on a reduced scale. There were 57 employees in 1938 but the quarry closed permanently in 1948.

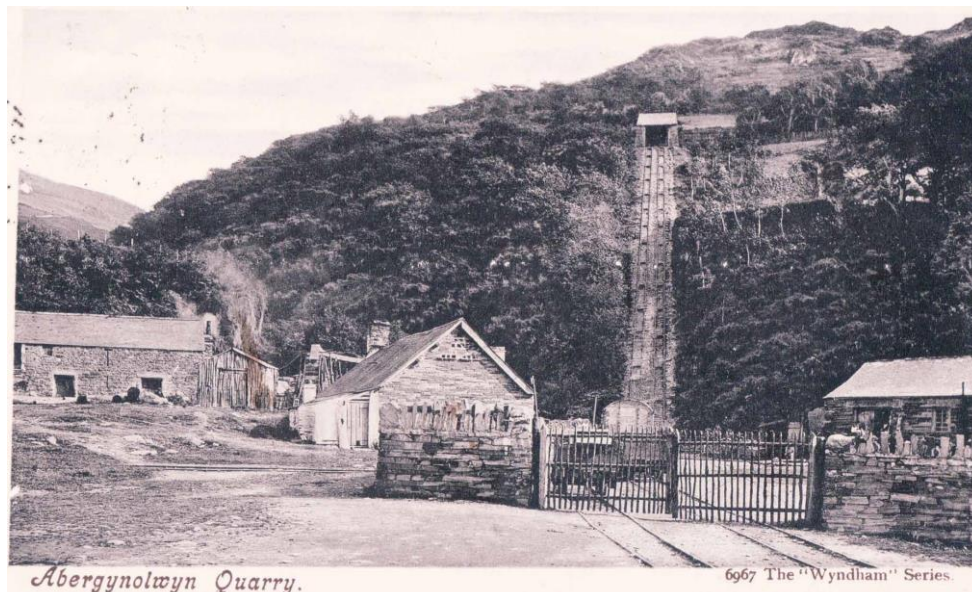


Fig 8 Inclined plane at the south end of the village. Centre left is Pandy Farm and further left a former farm building, both of which remain standing. (© Sara Eade)

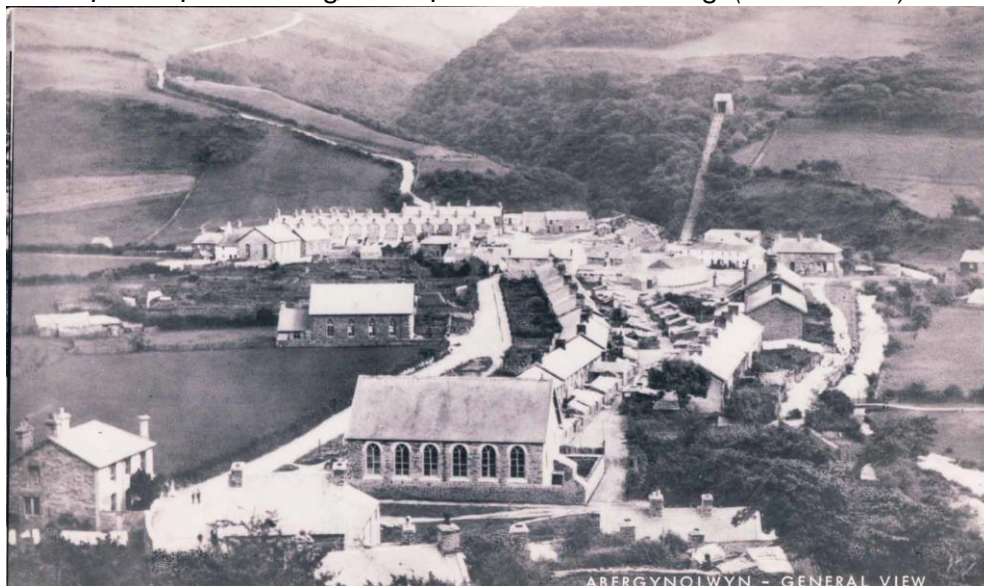


Fig 9 Abergynolwyn looking south in the early twentieth century, with the inclined plane in the background, Capel Jerusalem in the foreground and Riverside House lower left. (© Sara Eade)

Closure of the quarry spelled the end for the Talyllyn Railway, but it was rescued by a group of enthusiasts and became the first heritage steam railway in Britain in 1951. Visitors to the Talyllyn Railway and nearby Cadair Idris began visiting Abergynolwyn and there were two cafes in the village in the third quarter of the twentieth century. Since the closure of the quarry there has been some new development in the village, although little in the way of demolition. Maes-y-Meillion was built in the mid twentieth century on a greenfield site by Heol Llanegryn. Tan-y-Fedw and Bron y Gader are later developments of bungalows on the site of the nineteenth-century allotments.

4 Character of Building

4.1 Building style and detail

Pre-industrial buildings have been subsumed into the nineteenth century village, but remain a visual presence. Abergynolwyn farmstead was an L-shaped block of buildings, some of which have survived, one of them with ventilation strips characteristic of farm buildings (fig 10). The Railway Inn itself was enlarged by adding a rear lean-to by c1864 and by an additional bay by 1889 (fig 11). Pandy Farm also survives in part, although the farmhouse itself was rebuilt in the nineteenth century. A former outbuilding stands beside the lane to Bryn Eglwys (fig 12).



Fig 10 Outbuilding behind the Railway Inn, showing its ventilation strips and field-stone construction.



Fig 11 The Railway Inn, with farm buildings behind.



Fig 12 The altered former farm building of Pandy Farm, later used as part of the school slate works.

The earliest nineteenth-century houses in the village are of one-and-a-half storeys, derived from a vernacular rural tradition. Merion House and Ivy Cottage form a pair, both double-fronted, but with large, modern gabled dormers (fig 13). They stand in a prominent position at the centre of the village. Another house on the main road, Tawelfryn, formerly the Cader Café, has also been altered, while Yr Hendy is a single-storey house but less conspicuous behind Pandy Square. Pandy Square is an L-shaped block of two-storey houses built in the mid-nineteenth century, and set diagonally to the main road (fig 14). These houses are single and double-fronted and are more urban in inspiration than the cottages.



Fig 13 Meirion House and Ivy Cottage, two mid-nineteenth century cottages at the main road junction in the centre of the village.



Fig 14 Pandy Square, an L-shaped block of two-storey houses built in the mid-nineteenth century. The house on the right formerly housed a shop.

The earliest of the Abergynolwyn Slate Company's houses are two rows on Heol Llanegryn which are single storey (fig 15). Despite being at least a decade later, they represent an earlier building tradition than Pandy Square, specifically the more humble rural cottages of the region. They were an extremely conservative design for the 1860s and offered a very

basic level of accommodation. Moreover, they bear little relation to the drawings produced by James Stevens in 1864, bar the original twelve-pane sash windows which are over-sized for small cottages. By joining twelve traditional cottages in a row Heol Llanegryn can be seen as transitional between rural and industrial housing. The houses are set well back from the road, with front gardens that were originally conceived as vegetable plots, characteristic of industrial rows in the mid-nineteenth century.

The later company houses are of two storeys, some with attics. Numbers 13-24 Heol y Dwr / Water Street correspond closely with the designs produced in 1864 by James Stevens, while other houses incorporate features seen in the drawings, such as lintels with shallow carved heads, and overhanging eaves.

Collectively, the company houses in Abergynolwyn show improvements in the standard of industrial housing. The later houses in Heol y Dwr / Water Street and Heol Tanybryn are more spacious in terms of floor area and room height than the cottages in Heol Llanegryn. They also reveal the emergence of subtle social hierarchies. In Heol y Dwr / Water Street numbers 1-12 are single-fronted two-storey houses, with large front gardens but without originally having garden walls. Numbers 13-18 are larger single-fronted houses, also with attics, and are set back from the street behind stone walls and small front gardens. So too are Numbers 19-24 which are otherwise larger, have two-window fronts, an attic storey and the façade is articulated by pilaster strips and sill band (fig 16). Heol Tanybryn reveals a similar differentiation, in that the larger houses on the south side are set back from the street behind forecourt walls with railings, whereas the remaining houses open directly on to the street (fig 17).



Fig 15 Heol Llanegryn, a development of one-storey cottages derived from a local rural tradition. The house on the right retains twelve-pane sash windows.



Fig 16 Numbers 13-24 Heol y Dwr / Water Street, showing the front garden walls with slate-slab gate piers and slate fences. Numbers 19-24 also have a sill band and pilaster strips.



Fig 17 Heol Tanybryn. The taller houses on the right are set back from the street behind forecourt walls, a subtle indication of status. The central house, with altered windows, was formerly a shop.

The latest houses of the nineteenth century are also of a higher status, semi-detached pairs that were built toward the end of the nineteenth century, after the workmen's houses had been completed. They include Egryn Cottages next to the Congregational Chapel on Heol Llanegryn (see fig 31). The opening of the mill and the emergence of institutions, such as chapels and school, brought a small local professional class in the form of supervisors, ministers and schoolteachers. Two of these larger late-nineteenth century houses incorporated shops (fig 18).



Fig 18 Two late-nineteenth century houses of superior standard. The right-hand house was formerly a shop, its front replaced by two modern sash windows.

The back yards of Heol y Dwr / Water Street, Heol Llanegryn and Tanybryn contribute much to the industrial character of the village. They faced the railway, the course of which survives even though the rails have been taken up (fig 19). All of the houses had rear garden walls, privies, and bunkers with coal holes, although most of them have now been rebuilt and the extant coal holes have been blocked up.

The most prominent individual buildings in the village are the non-conformist chapels and school. The surviving chapels are all characteristic of the second half of the nineteenth century, with gable-end facades. They stand prominently on the main streets, but each is set back from the street line behind a railed forecourt (fig 20). All of them have arched windows – round-headed in Capel Saron, pointed in Cwrt and Capel Jerusalem – which distinguish them in village where all non-religious buildings have lintels. The small parish church is relatively inconspicuous, built in a modest Gothic style with a bellcote rather than a steeple. Its most interesting characteristic is its peripheral location, perhaps symbolic of the place of the established Church in nineteenth-century Welsh working-class communities. Yr Hen Ysgol, the former school, is a tall single-storey building, typical of late-nineteenth century board schools in their desire for airy and light-filled classrooms. It stands

in its own grounds, but in a prominent position on the main road. The village police station was established in the last decade of the nineteenth century and served the whole valley.



Fig 19 Line of the former railway between Heol Llanegryn and Heol y Dwr / Water Street.



Fig 20 Capel Jerusalem, built in 1878. The external character of the chapel has been well preserved, despite conversion to a new use.

Abergynolwyn had and retains a range of building types that made it a fully-formed, self-contained community by the end of the nineteenth century. The visual dominance of chapel over church emphasises its Welsh industrial character.

4.2 Building materials

Building materials make a strong contribution to the character of the built heritage. Its regional character is, to a large extent, derived from the use of local materials.

There are two distinctive forms of materials used for walls in the village. Boulders and field stones were used to build the pre-industrial and early-industrial buildings in the village (fig 21). Discarded material from Bryn Eglwys, in the form of thin slate blocks, was used for buildings of the 1860s and later, usually laid in more or less regular courses (fig 22). Early photographs indicate that rubble-stone houses erected before the 1860s were generally limewashed, whereas buildings built after that date were not, instead preferring to display the dark slate (fig 23). The tradition has been largely maintained. Abergynolwyn is roofed in slate, but the need to renew roofs over time has meant that many extant roofs are replacements and not necessarily using local slates (fig 24).



Fig 21 Field stone, used to construct walls until the 1860s.



Fig 22 Thin slate slabs, essentially waste material from Bryn Eglwys Quarry, was used for constructing walls from the 1860s.



Fig 23 Abergynolwyn viewed from the Talylyn Railway. In this picture the pre-1860s houses are whitewashed, unlike the later buildings in which the stone is exposed. (© Sara Eade)



Fig 24 Roof slates have been replaced on many buildings, including these cottages in the village centre. The modern roof on the left has bands of fish-scale slates, historically absent from the village.

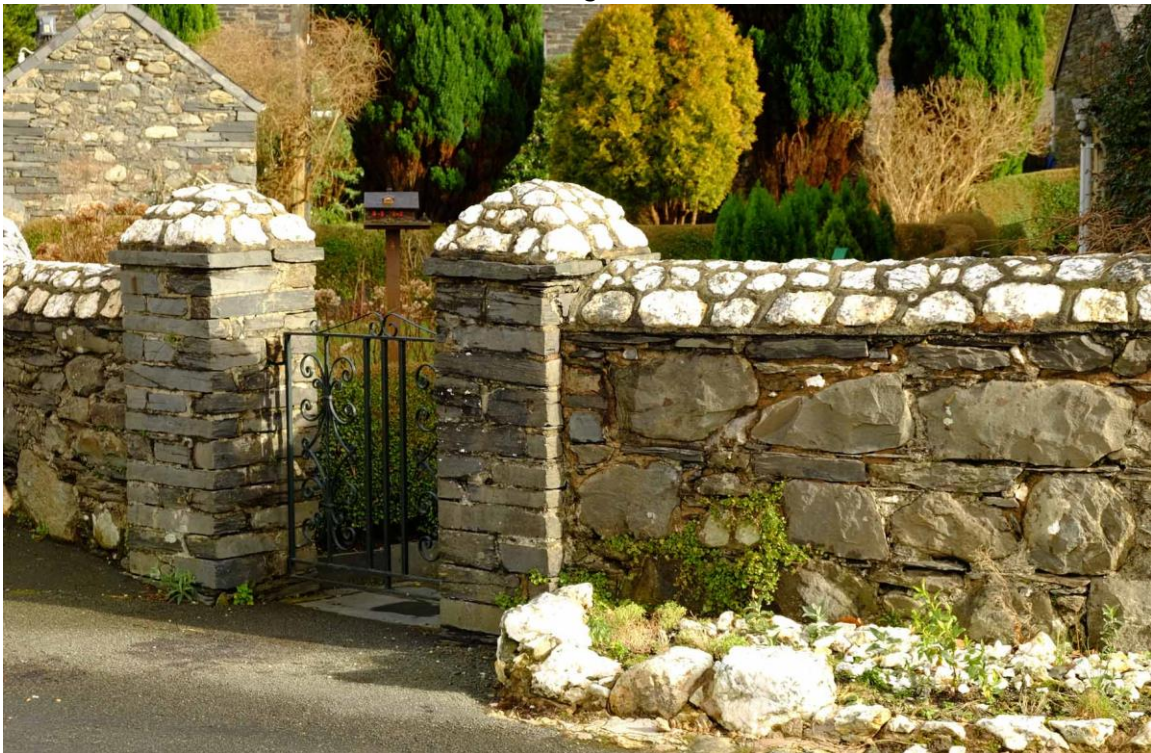


Fig 25 This garden wall features field stones, roughly-coursed slate blocks, and a coping course of broken pieces of quartz.

Rough-hewn slates are used for the majority of buildings in the village, including the chapels and the church, houses, outbuildings and garden walls. There is, therefore, no status implication in the use of materials. Slate lintels are common – some of those on Heol y Dwr

/ Water Street have been moulded – although quarried rock-faced stone was used for dressings and quoins on the Cwrt and Saron chapels. Brick is used sparingly, almost entirely for chimney stacks in Heol Llanegryn and Heol y Dwr / Water Street, covering an approximate five-year span in the 1860s.

Seams of quartz occur occasionally within the veins of slate. Broken pieces of quartz were used for the coping courses of garden walls, contrasting with dark hue of the slate. This feature can be seen in the two Egryn cottages on Heol Llanegryn and Y Bwythyn and Frondeg in the centre of the village, in each case belonging to the last decade of the nineteenth century (fig 25).

Sawn slate slabs are used as gate piers, which is a signature feature of quarry settlements across north-west Wales (fig 26). Slate fences, known as *crawiau* and composed of lines of rough slabs laid on end, are used to outline fields adjacent to the village, but in the village itself this technique is used only sparingly, and survives occasionally to divide gardens in Heol y Dwr / Water Street. An unusual feature is the use of tall monolithic slates as poles for hanging washing lines (see fig 34).



Fig 26 Gate piers of sawn slate slabs are characteristic of the North Wales slate-quarrying region. These gates are to the forecourt of Capel Saron.

In the twentieth century pebble-dash became a signature feature of buildings in the region, but in the final quarter of the twentieth century thin slate blocks came to be widely used again. Buildings such as Y Ganolfan, new cottages beside Pandy Farm, the bus shelter and garden walls and outbuildings, such as garages and sheds, are all built of slate.

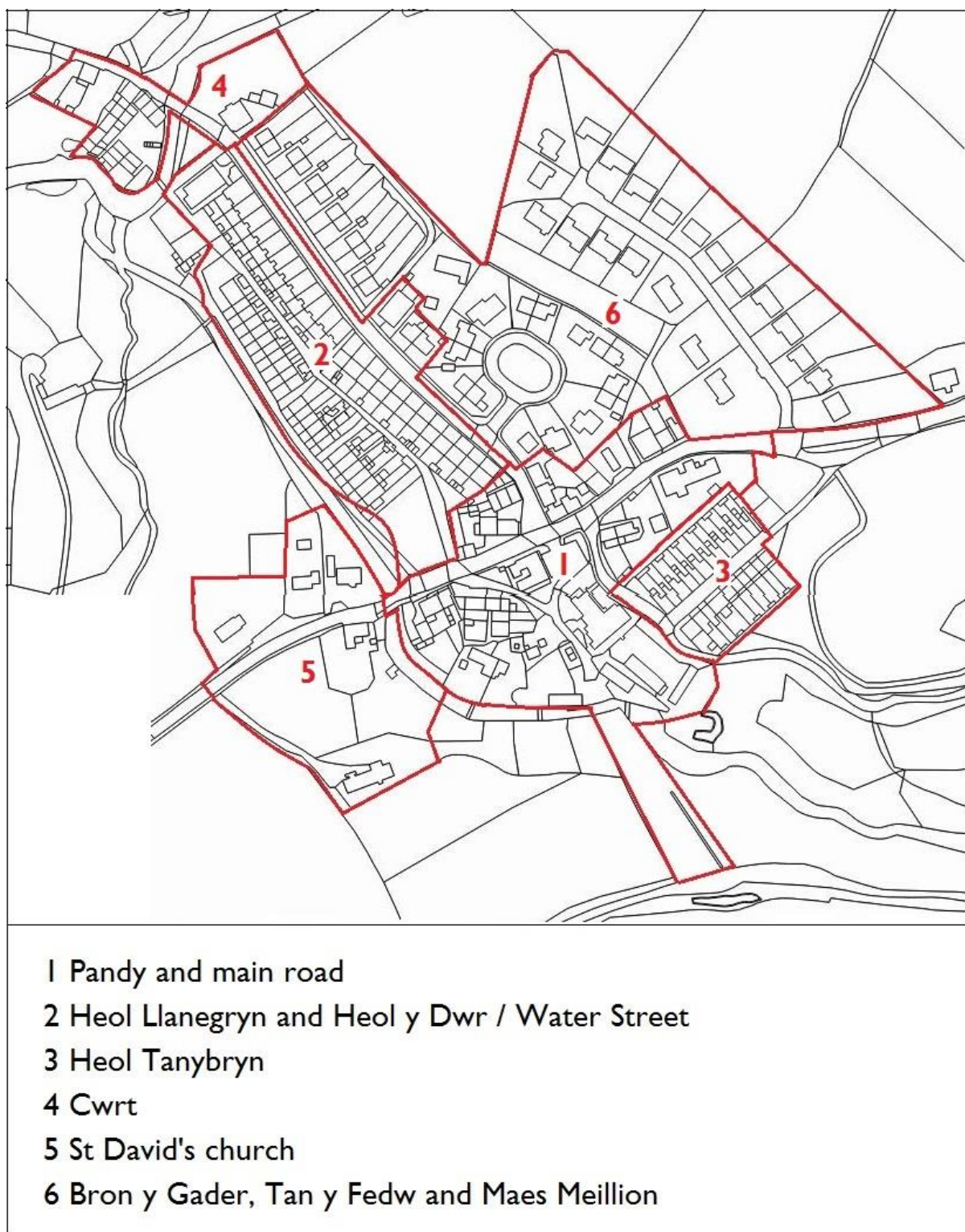


Fig 27 Character areas in Abergynolwyn.

5 Character Areas

5.1 Main road and Pandy, including railway incline

This character area covers most of the buildings on the south side of the main road through the village. It extends from the east end of the village, where there is a cast-iron milepost, to an altered bridge over Nant Gwernol to the west. It is bordered by the steep hillside to the south, Nant Gwernol to the south and west, and the lane to Bryn Eglwys to the east. On the hillside a railway incline was constructed from the Talyllyn Railway.

The former Pandy Farm and Pandy Square occupy the land south of the main road, (fig 27, 28). This area contains buildings of a wide range of dates, from the pre-industrial Pandy Farm and its surviving outbuildings, which are of at least eighteenth-century origin, to Y Ganolfan of 2004. It has quarrymen's cottages in the form of Pandy Square, which date from the period before the McConnells bought the quarry.



Fig 28 Buildings around Pandy Farm. The former outbuilding is in the foreground.

The pattern of building around Pandy Farm looks random, but is determined partly by the layout of the farmstead and by the piecemeal way in which the open areas have been filled in. Nineteenth-century maps show this to have been largely open (and the railway passed across here), but modern buildings, such as Y Ganolfan, public toilets and a modern shop facing the main road, have all altered the character of this part of the village. New houses are generally in proportion with the nineteenth-century buildings, although they make the older buildings more difficult to appreciate and less visible.

Pandy Square is one of the most prominent buildings on the south side of the main road and it retains strong nineteenth-century character and detail, including small-pane sash windows.

The pre-1864 buildings are constructed mostly of rubble stone. With the exception of a converted farm building, they are all painted white.

Buildings facing the main road itself are more varied in character, and much of the village history can be read here. Some of the most prominent buildings in the village face the main road. Near the west end the Railway Inn dominates, its setting enhanced by farm buildings on its west side. On its north side is Lichfield Terrace, a line of three mid-twentieth century houses on the site of earlier farm buildings and a school, possibly incorporating some of the earlier fabric. At the junction with Heol Llanegryn is a well-preserved mid-twentieth century road sign featuring the Anglicised place-name spellings then in general use.

Capel Saron and Yr Hen Ysgol stand opposite each other and embody the emergence of Abergynolwyn as a self-contained village community (fig 29). Other buildings on the main road are domestic, including pairs of mid-nineteenth century cottages built in the early period of quarry working, and semi-detached houses of the late nineteenth century (fig 30).

Since the buildings are of different dates, rubble stone and slate blocks are seen variously in the buildings, and in the garden walls. Most of the buildings facing the main road had small-pane sash windows, some of which have survived, but there has been much replacement.



Fig 29 Capel Saron on the main road.



Fig 30 Looking east along the main road from the centre of the village.

5.2 Heol Llanegryn and Heol y Dwr / Water Street

The Heol Llanegryn and Heol y Dwr / Water Street character area mainly comprises houses built by the Abergynolwyn Slate Company in the period 1865-69 (fig 27). Two long rows of single-storey houses make up the buildings on the west side of Heol Llanegryn, the view terminated at the north end by Capel Jerusalem. The two rows are not identical. In the later row, to the north, the houses have gabled porches. Whereas most of the houses were built for sash windows, in the earlier row some of the houses had wide, three-light casement windows. Most of the doors and windows have been replaced, but there are some small-pane sash windows surviving. A small number of houses have some render on the walls. On the opposite side of the road is Cwrt Congregational chapel, now converted to two dwellings. Next to it stands the two Egryn Cottages, built in the last decade of the nineteenth century and forming a strong visual group with the chapel, all built of dark slate (fig 31).

Heol y Dwr / Water Street faces Nant Gwernol, where the bank is retained by a slate wall (fig 32). Originally stone-faced, some of the houses are now rendered and painted white. Other alterations include near universal window replacement and addition of flat-roof dormers to numbers 13-24. Numbers 13-24 retain mostly original stone garden walls, with slab gate piers, but in numbers 1-12 only a minority of the houses have garden walls, all of which were later additions.

The lane at the rear of Heol y Dwr / Water Street and Heol Llanegryn was the line of the railway. The houses all have walled yards, with former coal bunkers and privies, although they are much rebuilt. In a few of the houses the coal holes remain visible, invariably

blocked up. Despite these changes, continued use of slate blocks has ensured that the yards have retained original character.



Fig 31 Egryn Cottages and Cwrt Congregational Chapel form a strong group on Heol Llanegryn.



Fig 32 Heol y Dwr / Water Street, with river retaining wall on the bank of Nant Gwernol.



Fig 33 Heol Tanybryn

5.3 Heol Tanybryn

Tanybryn is a street created and laid out c1870, with houses on both sides, at the foot of the steep valley slope (fig 27). Listed-building status has ensured that they are the best preserved houses in the village. The houses have a strong urban character, are built of slate stone, mostly retaining their sash windows, but also featuring projecting eaves and slate stacks (fig 33). The south side incorporates a row of larger houses, one of which was formerly a shop, a subtle social distinctions such as forecourt walls and railings to the larger houses.

In the north row the houses have rear wings, all of which are partly limewashed. The line of the railway that ran behind the back yards of the houses is preserved, and some of the coal holes in the (largely rebuilt) coal bunkers are still visible, albeit blocked up (fig 34).

5.4 Cwrt

Cwrt is a small cluster of houses contained within a loop of the river on the north side of Pont Cwrt (figs 27, 35). It also includes Riverside House on the south side. All of the extant buildings had been built by 1889, but they were not a part of the Abergynolwyn Slate Company development of the village, but a separate, presumably speculative, development.

Pont Cwrt is a pre-industrial bridge with wide segmental stone arch. The parapets have been rebuilt but overall the bridge retains its original character and has not been widened.

On the south side of the bridge is Riverside House, incorporating Hen Siop Cwrt, which has a scribed roughcast front painted white, but is otherwise built of slate.



Fig 34 Line of the former railway behind Heol Tanybryn. The tall slate monolith in the centre of the picture was used as a washing line.



Fig 35 Houses in Cwrt, viewed from the south west across Nant Gwernol

The houses on the north side of the bridge are two-storey slate-built houses with slate roofs and stone stacks. They are mostly now cement rendered and painted white. There is a short row facing the road and two rows at right angles behind the road. Owing to the cramped nature of the site, some of the latter houses are reached via a covered alleyway built into one of the houses facing the road, and are barely visible except from the opposite bank of the river or the hillside to the north.



Fig 36 Church of St David

5.5 St David's Church

Buildings on the west side of Pont Gwernol were late additions to the village, and have no special coherence as a group (fig 27). The church is relatively inconspicuous, set above the road, as is the war memorial beside its entrance drive (fig 36). Other buildings that stand to the west of Nant Gwernol include the old police station, also established long after the village had come into being, and in a pre-existing house. It has otherwise twentieth-century houses, including Noddfa, built by the Forestry Commission in 1959, a reminder that forestry was intended partly as a source of employment for post-industrial communities.

5.6 Bron y Gader, Tan y Fedw and Maes Meillion

There are three modern housing developments on the east side of the village (fig 27). Maes Meillion comprises two-storey houses on Heol Llanegryn, but set well back from the street. Bron y Gader and Tan y Fedw are bungalows on the site of the nineteenth-century allotments. Neither of these developments makes a significant negative visual impact on the character of the nineteenth-century buildings in the village.

6 Statement of Significance

Abergynolwyn is a well-defined industrial village of the nineteenth century (fig 37). Its development from rural farmsteads to industrial village, a process that took place over a period of about thirty years, is clearly demonstrated in the surviving buildings in the village.

The village was largely built by the Abergynolwyn Slate Company, owner of the Bryn Eglwys Quarry, an example of how the influence of capitalist owners extended from the workplace to the home in the nineteenth century. A further example of this is evidence of a railway that served the village, via an inclined plane from the Talylyn Railway. It is a unique survival in the slate-quarrying region of North Wales.



Fig 37 Abergynolwyn, looking north-west over the village.

The pattern of settlement was structured around an existing road junction in the Dysynni valley. Underlying the industrial settlement the pre-industrial farmsteads have survived, one of which is now the Railway Inn and remains a prominent building in the village. Housing stock in the village demonstrates several phases in the development and improving quality of industrial houses in the nineteenth century. Early examples, in pairs or short rows, were built of rubble field stone, and were limewashed. Houses of the Abergynolwyn Slate Company began with Heol Llanegryn, in which the single-storey house is in a vernacular idiom of local origin, but combined in rows of twelve in the manner of industrial housing. Later houses, represented mainly by Heol y Dwr / Water Street and Heol Tanybryn, are considerably more spacious and are of urban inspiration, based loosely on drawings by a Manchester architect. Although the terraced houses were predominantly for quarrymen, there are subtle differences that hint of social differentiation, for example in the size and scale of houses, and whether houses open to the street or are set back behind shallow

forecourts or front gardens. These distinctions are an important part of the character of the village.

Unlike the earlier whitewashed buildings, buildings from the 1860s were built of dark slate in thin slabs. This striking use of slate as a building material contributes much to the character of the village. The tradition has been revived since the late-twentieth century, notably for Y Ganolfan of 2004.

The village retains three chapel buildings, which were built by the Calvinistic Methodists, Independents and Wesleyan Methodist, the three most prominent denominations in North Wales in the nineteenth century. The parish church stands apart from the village centre, but its presence articulates the competition between the independent aspirations of the chapel-going workmen and the Anglican, patrician McConnel family. Its former school, Yr Hen Ysgol, completes the range of nineteenth-century public buildings, and there is also evidence of nineteenth-century shops and a converted smithy in the village.

Rapid growth of the village was not sustained and there was little building between 1890 and before the closure of the quarry in 1948. From a historical perspective it means that Abergynolwyn embodies a period of rapid development from the 1840s to the 1880s, a boom that was followed by a long decline, which is the story of extractive industries and their communities in the industrial revolution.

7 Recommendations

Abergynolwyn is a well-preserved nineteenth-century industrial village with a unique history and strong regional character. It is therefore worthy of consideration for Conservation Area status. The boundary of an area of special interest is easy to define, since the few modern developments stand mainly separate from the historic village (fig 38). By drawing the boundary on the line of Nant Gwernol, some historic buildings will be excluded, but these are detached from the main village. In particular the church, although important from a historical perspective, contributes very little to the overall character of the village. As the railway is such a rare phenomenon in an industrial village, and contributes to the special historical interest of the village, the incline below the Talyllyn Railway has also been included.

There have been some negative impacts to the historic integrity of the built heritage, which designation of Conservation Area status might begin to address. Original windows and doors have mostly been replaced, often with unsympathetic modern materials. This is most apparent in Heol y Dwr / Water Street, where there are also added flat-roofed dormers, but also includes listed buildings in Heol Tanybryn. The centre of the village was formerly an open yard, but has been slowly developed, and now includes a community centre, car park and public toilets. Much of the new build is constructed of slate, such as Y Ganolfan built in 2004, which is in sympathy with earlier buildings and the regional tradition. Other buildings detract from the historic character of the village, the most conspicuous of which is the shop/house on the main street, sited opposite the main road junction. It is partly weatherboarded, a feature alien to the locality.

Notwithstanding these issues, Abergynolwyn is a compact and well-defined area of special architectural and historical interest worthy of preservation and enhancement, and therefore would qualify for Conservation Area status.



Fig 38 Proposed Abergynolwyn Conservation Area boundary

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Appendix I: Listed buildings in Abergynolwyn

	Listed building reference number	Grade
Pont y Cwrt	23195	II
Mile marker	23190	II
The Old Shop	23206	II
10 Heol Tan-y-bryn	23177	II
11 Heol Tan-y-bryn	23178	II
1A Heol Tan-y-bryn	23180	II
2 Heol Tan-y-bryn	23169	II
3 Heol Tan-y-bryn	23170	II
4 Heol Tan-y-bryn	23171	II
5 Heol Tan-y-bryn	23172	II
5A Heol Tan-y-bryn	23184	II
6 Heol Tan-y-bryn	23173	II
6A Heol Tan-y-bryn	23185	II
7 Heol Tan-y-bryn	23174	II
7A Heol Tan-y-bryn	23186	II
9A Heol Tan-y-bryn	23188	II
Dolawel, 1 Heol Tan-y-bryn	23168	II
Wynfryn, 8 Heol Tan-y-bryn	23175	II
Ty Clid, Heol Tan-y-bryn	23176	II
Brynderw, Heol Tan-y-bryn	23179	II
Grail Retreat, Heol Tan-y-bryn	23189	II
Isfryn, 8A Heol Tan-y-bryn	23188	II
Glasfryn, 4A Heol Tan-y-bryn	23183	II
Floreat, 3A Heol Tan-y-bryn	23182	II
Ybythyn, 2A Heol Tan-y-bryn	23181	II

