

Exploring Abergavenny

34 West Grofield





## EXPLORING ABERGAVENNY

---

For several years the Abergavenny and District Civic Society has been studying the streets, spaces and buildings of Abergavenny and Mardy outside the town centre. This process is known as 'characterisation', defined by the Welsh Government as 'capturing the local distinctiveness by identifying how places have been shaped over time.'

This record of what makes each part of the town distinctive, and often rather special, increases our awareness of the qualities that need to be considered and respected when new development is proposed. We hope that the planning authority will share our impressions and take account of our views. We also hope that our studies will increase residents' understanding and appreciation of their town, encouraging them to take an active interest in how change is managed in the future, or to conduct more research into aspects of the town's development.

The survey started in partnership with the Civic Trust for Wales as a pilot project to test whether community groups could carry out urban characterisation. The outcome was the Trust's *Exploring your town* manual and toolkit (2013). A County Council conservation area appraisal adopted in 2016 has also been taken into account, and this also covers the town's commercial centre<sup>1</sup>.

We have divided the town into thirty-six character areas. This report presents the history and character of one of those areas.

Now we would like *your* contribution:

- *Have we made any mistakes?*
- *Can you add to the history of the area?*

- *Do you agree with our impressions of the area?*
- *What have we missed that should have been recorded?*

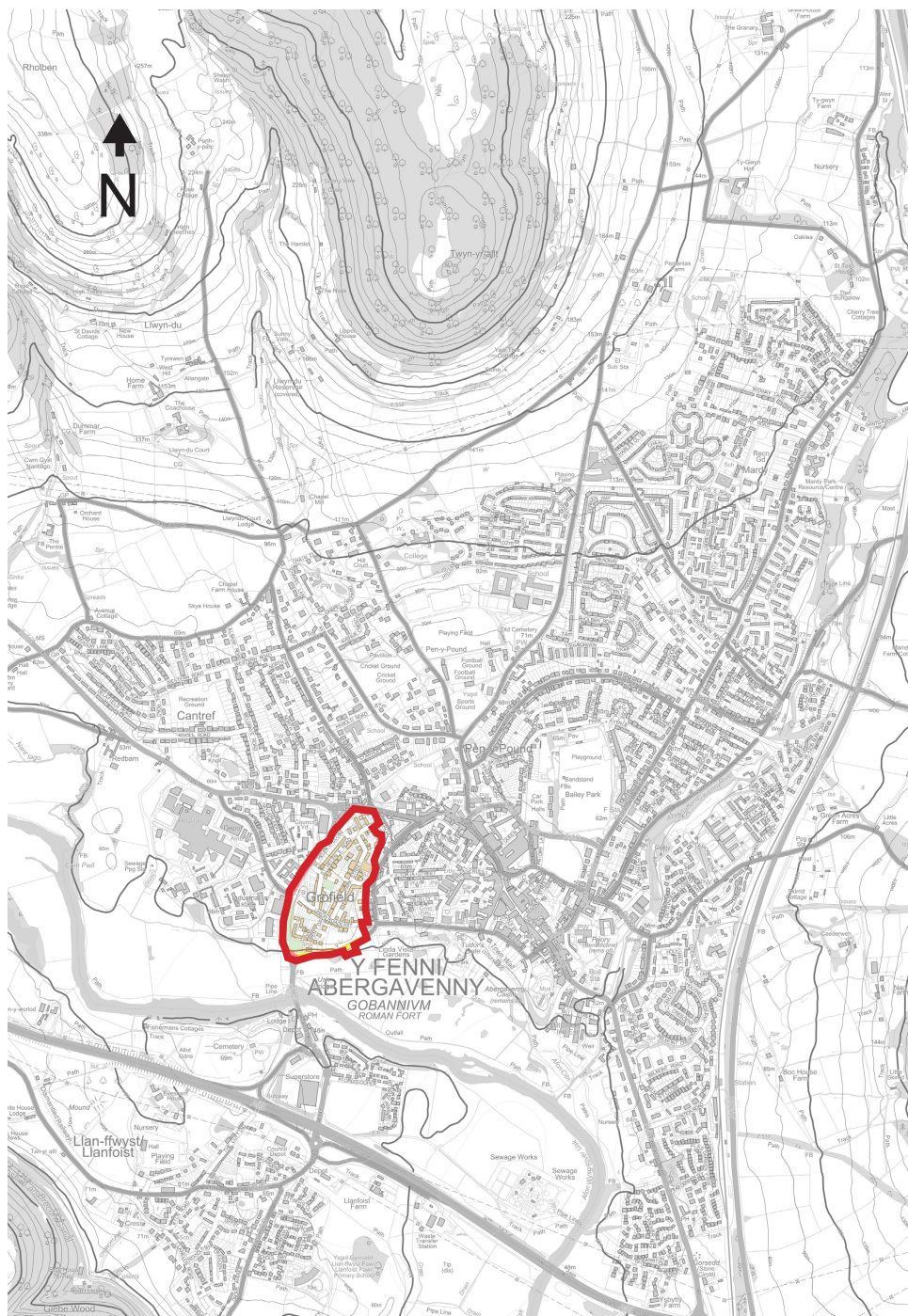
All the reports are available at <https://abercivsoc.com> and comments may be sent to [abercivsoc@gmail.com](mailto:abercivsoc@gmail.com) or recorded when the reports are exhibited.

### Acknowledgements and copyright information

The Society is especially grateful for the survey contributions of Clive Bransom, Dick Cole, Tony Konieczny, Nigel Patterson, Anna Petts, Duncan Rogers and Jay Shipley. Dick Cole has carried out much of the research and final report writing, and accepts responsibility for any errors. None of the team had prior experience of heritage studies; all have learned much from the project.

We also thank Anna Leron and Dr Matthew Griffiths of the Civic Trust for Wales for their early support. Matthew Griffiths, now of the Open University, has also helped to present the project for the education and participation of residents, including the design of these character area reports.

This publication © 2017 Abergavenny and District Civic Society. Mapping based on Ordnance Survey data © Crown copyright and database 2017 Ordnance Survey (Digimap Licence via the Open University). For educational use only. Unauthorised reproduction infringes Crown copyright and may lead to prosecution or civil proceedings. Aerial image (figure 1) © Google 2016.



## WEST GROFIELD

THIS AREA BETWEEN Merthyr Road and the A4143 Link Road is more popularly identified by its two main roads – Park Street and St Helen's Road.

This later part of Grofield may not have the historical interest of early Victorian housing, built before the 1875 Public Health Act, but the topography and often quite subtle variations in the architecture give a self-contained community its own character. As elsewhere in the town, development was slow, perhaps suggesting an overprovision of opportunities, but this adds to the variety. There is rather less variety in the size of homes, suggesting less social mixture. It must be hoped that the new Community Centre is strengthening the local community spirit that must have suffered when the school closed.

The Blorenge is a commanding presence, together with substantial belts of trees on two sides of the area compensating for the limited amount of greenery





## Key to map

Conservation area boundary



Listed Building



Building of special local interest



Building of local interest



Metal railings



Local landmark building



Good sense of place



Terminated street view



Deflected street view



Vista, long view



Visual pinch point



Building rhythm



Important walling



Important trees or shrubs



Important hedges



Footpath



Improvement opportunity



Figure 2: character analysis





Figure 3: Once a place of worship - former mission hall, Cae Pen y Dre

within. The condition of the housing appears generally good and there are very few eyesores. Street parking is perhaps the greatest problem, usually following the Abergavenny tendency to use half the footway, no doubt sometimes impeding the less able.

County Council consultants have identified the junction of Sunny Bank with Park Street as the only space in Grofield with a 'good sense of space'. We have identified others but agree that this space has potential for improvement, particularly if it would introduce greenery into the street. A substantial building in the space beside no 50 Park Street, now occupied with a garage (and a view of the hospital chimney), would strengthen the enclosure.

## Historical background

In 1862 the section of the early 19th century Govilon to Hereford tramroad that passed close to Abergavenny was reopened as part of the London and North Western Railway's route into the upper valleys of the coalfield. By the First



Figure 4: St Helen's Close

World War the growth of railway traffic was responsible for over 1,000 railway-related jobs, the biggest source of employment in the area. The fastest rate of population growth was in the 1870s, but considerable in the 1880s and the first decade of the 1900s.

The 1854 Abergavenny Improvement Act plan shows no development between Merthyr Road and the then tramway apart from a few buildings on Merthyr Road, the cottages that survive on Merthyr Road backing on to the Meadows, some cottages adjoining the tramway opposite the gasworks (1823), and a structure on the north side of Union Road (or Lane). Union Road is an old road, the westward extension of Tudor Street towards Brecon, so named after the Poor Law Union workhouse (1838) was built beyond the bridge over the tramroad.

By the 1870s the town's first suburb, our East Grofield character area, was largely complete. A house and shop (now Listed) had been built on the corner of Brecon Road and Commercial Street and development had started north of Brecon Road. Building on the fields between Merthyr Road and the railway



would clearly be convenient for both railway workers and those employed in the town.

An 1877 town plan labels the area 'Building Society's Estate', suggesting how much of the development was funded, perhaps by loans to small builders who built to rent. The 1881 Ordnance Survey map shows that about a third of the area had been developed, notably the terraces without front gardens on St Helen's Road and housing in the Union Road East and Cae Pen y Dre area. Park Street was still being developed in the early 1900s; the Park Street school dates from 1894. Many of the terraces bear individual names and dates.

The streets were laid out to make the best use of the space available, but the boundary between Park Street and St Helen's Road properties is approximately coincident with an old field boundary. The 1881 map shows an unexplained feature at the junction of Park Street with Sunny Bank, where there is now a pedestrian refuge. It appears to be a barrier across Park Street separating the southern section from the northern and could reflect an old property boundary. This may explain why only a garage occupies a potential building plot at this point.

After the First World War there was only some development on Union Road East and a small amount of infilling until in the 1970s a sheltered housing development replaced early housing at Cae Pen y Dre. In the 1980s a link road replaced the railway that had ceased to operate some years earlier, one side of St Helen's Road was provided with rear access, and a large nursery garden at the northern end of the area between St Helen's Road and the former railway was developed for social and private housing. More housing has recently been built in Cae Pen y Dre. There is no longer a shop or public house in the area. The school closed in 2005, but has recently opened as a community centre run as a social enterprise.

### Setting, streets and spaces

The area lies between Merthyr Road and the A4143 Link Road on the line of the former LNWR railway. It has an undulating topography that adds considerably to the character of its terraced housing. The ground rises steeply from the roundabout on Merthyr Road (on the Usk flood plain at about 50m above sea level) to a high point on Union Road East at the southern end of Park Street (about 61m) before dipping to a low point on Park Street south of the Sunny



Figure 5: Former public house, corner of Park Street and Union Road





Figure 6: Union Road West

Bank junction, and then rising to another high point on the northern section of St Helen's Road.

Union Road is an old road, perhaps the pre-turnpike road to Brecon, and Union Road East is narrow, with a carriageway of 4-5m width and narrow footways in places. The other streets were set out for development quite geometrically in the 1870s and are wider at about 6m, though this means windows face each other only 8m apart where there are no front gardens. Dogleg bends on Park Street and St Helen's Road add interest to the townscape, and there are several street views neatly terminated by buildings.

Older properties tend not to have front gardens but overall about half the homes have one, usually only a metre or so deep and fronted by a low wall with iron railings. Nos 6/8 and 19-27 Park Street (and 37-43 Cae Pen y Dre) have railings on a brick base, similar to properties in the older part of Grofield. Park Street has many more front gardens than St Helen's Road, an indication of a later date and perhaps a somewhat higher status at the time. A number of homes have only pedestrian access, notably the terrace of nos 18-34 at a right angle to



Figure 7: Park Street, north end

Union Road East.

Rear gardens vary in length according to the space between the streets, but most are 15-20m and as narrow as the house frontage. As in the older part of Grofield, map evidence suggests that the garden space at the back of some of the terraces may have originally been shared.

The area has only one internal green public open space – a small 'pocket park' on St Helen's Road with trees and seating provided near the end of the last century, having somehow escaped development. There were piggeries or similar on the rear boundary until at least the early 20th century. The kerb radii at the entrance suggest that a rear access road similar to those east of Merthyr Road may have been contemplated. There is an equipped playground north of Union Road before the Link Road bridge.

The western side of St Helen's Road was provided with a rear access road thirty-forty years ago, enabling garages to be built in the shortened gardens. The garages vary in appearance but much of the original picket fencing survives.

No footpaths connect Park Street and St Helen's Road, despite their length.



There are steps down to the Link Road where the Union Road footbridge crosses the road. There is another link to that road at the bend in St Helen's Road, and there are steep steps down from Cae Pen y Dre to Merthyr Road.

The Blorengie is a strong presence to the south, adding greatly to the character of the area, and the Rholben closes the northward view from the south end of St Helen's Road. Other interesting views include that from Sunny Bank across Merthyr Road into Victoria Street and from Union Road East into Tudor Street, with the Town Hall in the distance.

The former railway embankment now provides a valuable belt of mature trees between St Helen's Road and the Link Road, thinning only where there is room for the footpath link to the road. Mature trees continue on the slope down to Merthyr Road, those near the roundabout replacing cottages cleared about 1970. Those further east are in underused ground, now with permission for a modern-styled house, and the garden of Westgate House.

Unsurprisingly in this densely built area, residents without rear access have a street parking problem, and it is often necessary for two wheels to be on the footway for traffic to pass. The problem is worsened by the area's proximity to the town centre. Fortunately no through traffic should be tempted to enter the area.

## Building character

Viewed on a map, over thirty years of two-storey terraced housing development would appear to have resulted in quite a uniform character. On the ground there is considerable variety of architectural detailing, size of property, and numerous features of minor interest. Furthermore most modern development has been sympathetic and has added to the character.

Most Victorian and Edwardian housing is fronted with squared and coursed rubble sandstone. A substantial proportion has been rendered and coloured, usually white. A small number are fronted in red brick (also used for side walls of some with stone frontages) and sometimes brick has also been colour-washed. A majority of stone frontages have yellow or buff brick stringcourses and detailing around door and window reveals, though these have often been stuccoed or painted white. Later terraces can have bay windows and slate canopies over doorways as elsewhere in the town. Slate or slate substitute roofs are still the norm, often with inserted Velux-type windows. Most chimneys seem to have survived, unlike original timber doors and windows. Most of the older houses



Figure 8: St Helens Road

have had rear extensions, not always of quality, but not widely visible. A number of Victorian houses, such as nos 29 and 117 St Helen's Road and nos 42/44 and 43-49 Union Road East, have unusual plan shapes in order to fit into the plot pattern. Another common feature is tunnelled access to the rear of terraced houses.

Among the many interesting variations from these generalisations are:

### *Park Street*

- No 19: double fronted end of terrace with a three-storey front gable;
- Nos 19-27: note the mid-terrace change from yellow to multi-coloured brick detailing;
- Nos 31/33: bays to both floors;
- No 50: extended in grey reconstituted stone;
- Nos 55-59: gabled roof dormers in tiled roofs;
- No 67 and no 36 Union Road East: possibly originally a single unit 'The Convent'; with decorative bargeboards to Park Street;





Figure 9: Cae Pen y Dre, old and new

- Nos 94-104: decorative eaves detail.

#### *St Helen's Road*

- Nos 1-5: unusual entrances;
- Nos 5/7: have polychromatic brick detailing;
- Nos 29-41: random rubble stonework suggests an early date; No 29 may have original window frames and brick decoration, others have stucco decoration;
- Nos 43-49: set back to the rear of their plots; dentillated eaves detail;
- No 51: survival of 'Edmund A Jenkins, Plumber and Decorator' sign on end gable;
- No 76: a former shop;
- Nos 80-94: white rendered terrace with front gabled central and end features;
- No 102: either a half of nos 102/04 much altered when no 104 was demolished for the access road, or a new-build at that time;

- Severn House (between nos 71 and 81) and no 97: much altered un-typical detached;
- Early no 97 end-on to street, causing later nos 99/101 to be angled;
- Nos 117-127 (and 46 Union Road East): most are rendered; brick eaves detail;
- Nos 142-150: two-tone brick detailing (painted white at no 142) terminated by three-storey former pub/brewery at no 150.

#### *Sunny Bank*

- The south side bends attractively to end at the former shop at no 15, which curves to connect with Park Street.

#### *Union Road East*

- Nos 20-34: at a right angle to the street, brick colour-washed or rendered; eaves detail similar to Nos 117-127 St Helen's Road;
- No 37: black and cream brick stringcourse;
- Nos 39/41: pair of large painted brick houses with triangular dormers and carved bargeboards;
- Outbuilding at rear of no 150 St Helen's Road: sign 'Try Delafield Noted Ales and Stout' just visible on west side;
- No 47 has a Tudor rose moulding (Marquess of Abergavenny's estate)

#### *Pen y Cae Dre*

- Nos 37/39: white-painted stone with black-painted brick detailing; basements.

#### *Merthyr Road*

- Nos 110-114 are early 19th century cottages each with a pair of half dormers and basements and/or balconies to the rear; larger No 108 has recently been redeveloped in a taller similar style;
- Nos 1-4 Usk View are a typical terrace of c. 1880; a recent new house to the west uses the same materials sympathetically, though the window proportions are not quite traditional. A similar house was approved east of Usk View in 2008.

There are a small number of individual inter-war or post-war houses and bungalows in the area, most at the Union Road end. Nos 2-12 Union Road East seem to date from the 1930s, possibly tied or council housing, with no 2 once a



shop, now an office, on the site of an earlier building. Wide-fronted nos 13/15 Union Road East may be former police houses (*cf* nos 18/20 Monmouth Road).

Four larger modern developments merit description:

- Cae Pen y Dre Close: a 1960s/70s social housing group in buff brick, pleasantly arranged and landscaped but with no references to local character; they replaced Victorian housing (Ebenezer Place);
- Nos 2-16 Cae Pen y Dre: recently built pastel-washed housing, with chimneys and railed front gardens reflecting local character well;
- Orchard Mews, St Helen's Road: white rendered late 20th century cottage development with dormered first floors on the site of a nursery garden, incorporating listed no 34 Brecon Road (mid 19th century house and shop, now a dental surgery); not entirely in local character, except that dormers are similar to nos 110-114 Merthyr Road;
- St Helen's Close: late 20th-century social housing in dark brown and red brick with yellow brick window surrounds; modern design with local references; attractive internal spaces.

Two non-residential buildings are of interest: the former Park Street Infants School (1894) recently converted to Abergavenny Community Centre, and a much neglected late 19th century corrugated steel mission hall on Cae Pen y Dre.

## Heritage Assets

The area has no listed buildings (that on the corner of Commercial Street and Brecon Road is in the Brecon Road character area, and Westgate Cottage, a toll-house joined to another listed house on the corner of Union Road and Merthyr Road, are considered within the East Grofield character area). No buildings appear to merit Listing, except possibly the mission hall on Cae Pen y Dre; its loss would be regrettable, as the stock of such iron buildings must be declining.

Unlike, for example, North Street, the area has long been within a conservation area. Relatively recent developments have shown sensitivity to local character, but designation has not prevented the widespread use of uPVC and added dormers that can detract from the character when prominent; article 4 directions could help protect the area from further character erosion.