

A large, historic stone building with a central tower, surrounded by a green lawn and trees. The building is constructed from dark brown stone with light-colored window frames and decorative elements. It features multiple levels of arched windows and a prominent central tower with a crenellated top. The foreground is a well-maintained green lawn with some small shrubs and trees. A person in a red jacket is walking on a path to the right. The sky is blue with scattered white clouds.

27 Pen y Fal

Exploring Abergavenny

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 centre¹.

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 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.

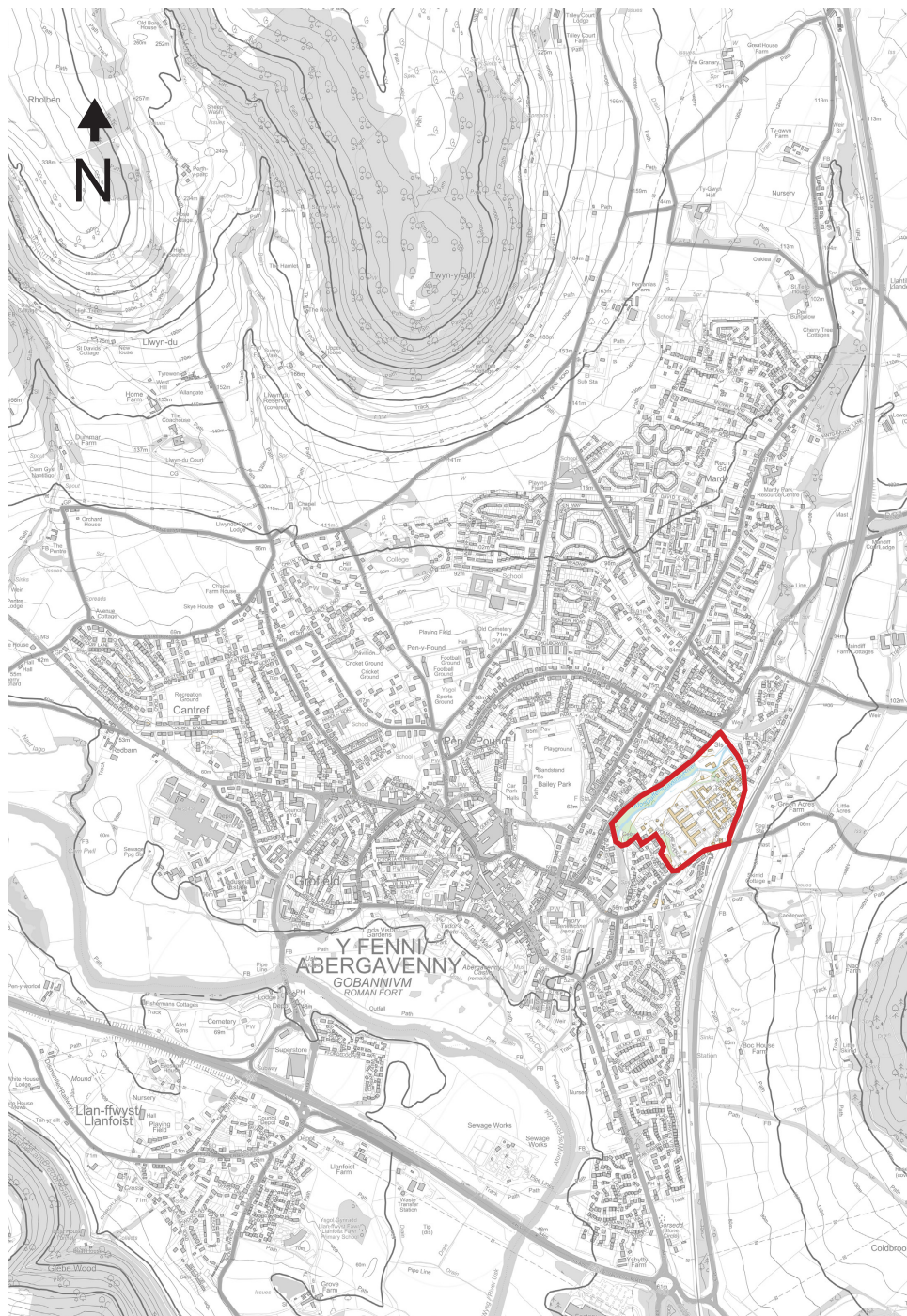
We also thank Anna Lermont and Dr Matthew Griffiths of the Civic Trust for Wales for their early support. Matthew Griffiths, now of the Open University, has also helped to present the project for the education and participation of residents, including the design of these character area reports.

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Cover: the 1851 asylum – now apartments

¹ <http://www.monmouthshire.gov.uk/abergavenny-conservation-area-appraisal>

Figure 1: location plan and aerial



PEN Y FAL

THIS CHARACTER AREA consists mainly of the grounds and surviving buildings of Pen y Fal Hospital, together with the modern housing that has replaced many of the hospital buildings.

The skilful conversion and extension of the hospital buildings, together with an exceptional parkland setting has provided a high quality living environment with a very distinctive character and fine views, especially when the trees are not





Figure 2: Laburnum Walk

in leaf.

While some of the architectural details of the modern buildings might be criticised, overall quality and distinctiveness give the area a strong sense of being a special place. The town houses are particularly effective at respecting the past without appearing institutional. The preservation of old trees and walls and the generous planting of shrubs and trees add greatly to the quality of the environment, though on-road parking in Chestnut Drive does not.

The likelihood that windows will change and more photovoltaic roof panels be added, undermining the architectural integrity of at least that part of the site outside the conservation area, may be a cause for regret.

Historical Background

In the 19th century, and probably earlier, this section of the Gavenny river had two corn mills, both on the northern bank and fed by mill races. Little Mill, now Old Mill, at the northern end remains, though it ceased operation many

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 3: character analysis





Figure 4: New and old

years ago; Priory Mill, at the southern end, was larger but was disused by 1900. It was swept away by the flood of 1931 and more recently replaced by a footbridge. A footbridge at Old Mill replaced another mid-way between the mills in the late 19th century, but this was removed in the early 20th century.

The Joint Counties Lunatic Asylum was built on farmland between the Gavenny and the then Monmouth road and opened in 1851. Initially it accommodated about 200 'pauper lunatics' in the main building, which remains today, set in landscaped grounds. Over the following century it was repeatedly extended to reach a capacity of over 1,000, and it changed its name to Monmouthshire Mental Hospital and, under the NHS, to simply Pen y Fal Hospital, though still treating mental health patients. The chapel was built in 1883 and a plaque near the river marks the cemetery for over 3,000 patients who died at the hospital. There was also a Hospital Farm east of the railway.

In the 1860s the creation of the junction between the main railway line between Newport and Hereford and the line to Merthyr caused a substantial embankment with road and river bridges to be built across the valley north of



Figure 5: Clock tower and Blorenge

the hospital.

The hospital closed in 1997 and the buildings and grounds were bought by Redrow Homes. Much apart from the main building, its lodge and the chapel was demolished and the footprint was used for new housing designed by Graham Frecknall of Monmouth. The main building became apartments, but the chapel awaits conversion.

Setting, Streets and Spaces

The ground falls in a north-westerly direction from over 80m above sea level at the railway to under 60m at the lowest point on the river. The slope steepens markedly near the river, which is not easily viewed through unmanaged woodland but cuts dramatically through the sandstone. This wild stretch of river is probably underappreciated in the town.

The hospital was positioned with its main frontage facing south-west and its extensions following a rectangular grain behind this. Most of the modern hous-



Figure 6 Chestnut Drive

ing follows this grain with the central axis of Bay Tree Lane focusing on the old hospital clock tower (and a taller conifer beyond), while another axis focuses on the old hospital chimney and the Blorenge (39 Chestnut Drive neatly closes the view in opposite direction). There are restored early 20th-century listed timber shelters in the grounds, one rectangular and six octagonal. These are similar to those in Victorian public gardens or seaside resorts and add significantly to the ambience of the grounds.

The main building retains much of the original mature landscaping, though the flower beds have been lost. The sloping new space between this building and the parallel Laburnum Walk has been sympathetically grassed and planted. Together with the open woodland on the far side of the Gavenny, the green spaces of Pen y Fal, private and public, appear as one with unrestricted access.

The site has some fine views of the Deri and Rholben, but these can be obstructed by tree foliage in summer. Views to the Blorenge are now blocked by conifers, except perhaps from the upper floors of the old hospital.

Hospital period footpaths (none are registered public rights of way) parallel

with and above the river have been retained, including that which drops down to a point at the mill race exit where a bridge crossed to the Old Mill until it was removed a few years ago. Some paths and roadways run beside low stone walls retained from the hospital period. A modern footbridge to Ross Road also connects to a footpath on the Ross Road side of the river, rejoining the road at the Old Mill. Ross Road has no footways and the former railway embankment unfortunately prevents any further extension of a path along the Gavenny.

The original hospital roadway through the green space serves the southern end of the site. It is less than 5m wide, with no footways, and gives access to several parking areas. Most of the spaces are allocated to numbered apartments, but the more remote ones are little used. Chestnut Drive is over 5m wide with two footways and some on-street parking.

The estate is bounded on the B3233 by the original 2m stone walls, with a wide gateway and attendant lodge to this section of the site. The Chestnut Drive entrance to the estate has breached the stone wall, but sensitively with gate piers of re-used stone and two lodge-like houses.

Laburnum Walk has short front gardens with metal railings set directly into ground, and other town houses have short garage accesses plus generous planting. Two-storey family houses are mostly open-fronted with landscaping and no consistent building line. Some large detached house gardens on the western edge of the area have unobtrusive low wicket fences so that these spaces effectively flow into the larger open areas.

Town house back gardens are narrow and only *ca* 8m long, with timber fencing now in a varying condition and colouring. Most other back gardens are a little longer; some with short sections of reused stone wall for back garden privacy. Two large houses set apart above the river have extensive gardens.

The new housing enjoys a high standard of planting, largely of evergreens such as laurel, and there are lamp standards in a traditional style.

Building Character

The listed three-storey main building is 160m long, almost symmetrical with return wings at each end. It steps down at the northern end. Its design features rock-faced rubble sandstone with Bath stone dressings and steeply pitched roofs. The style is mostly Gothic, but the central entrance has a Classical porch and balustrade, parapet and an attractive clock turret above. Gables and two large chimneys that once served the boilers break the impressive length of steep



Figure 7: Play shelter

slate roof. There are many other tall stone chimney stacks in the Tudor style. The original wooden sash windows have been replaced in uPVC. The building now provides nearly seventy apartments.

The two recent blocks of town houses, fourteen in total, are of a similar three-storey height and scale, grafted onto the back of the main building with a wide space between them. They have ground floor garages and the gable parapet detail found on the listed building and in most individual houses. The extensions also use sandstone and slate with the addition of concrete rather than Bath stone. The sandstone is more red than the old building but this is likely to darken with time. There are no chimneys.

The semi-derelict stone chapel, also listed, is in the Decorated style and has received permission for conversion to six residential units. Nearby is the listed lodge, similarly Gothic (apart from two more recent windows) in sandstone with Bath Stone details, single storey with an attic floor in the steeply sloping roof and a curious attached gate pier.

Five recent detached houses near the hospital cemetery are constructed with a

brick used throughout the site that matches the stone of the older Victorian buildings well.

Two apparently Victorian Gothic sandstone houses (probably reused stone) with Bath stone (or concrete) details provide an impressive entry to Chestnut Drive, and are modern.

Fifty-one three-storey town houses in the middle section are rendered, all still in original pinkish beige; some fronts have integral garages and flat-roofed sections or balcony parapets; others, notably Laburnum Walk which steps down towards the river, have Juliet balconies and garages at the rear. Windows are generally small.

The remainder of the houses are in the north-eastern half of the site. Steep gables, parapets to gables and partition walls, and faux arrow slit features in gables are gestures towards the original Gothic buildings. All are in the mottled 'antique' red brick with vertical buff brick detailing; some have hipped roofs with front gables; some have integral or attached garages, some free-standing. Many front windows are wide with three or four casements, and a few are circular. White uPVC windows are used throughout, with rather thick mullions and thin false horizontal bars. At a Chestnut Drive property pale brown uPVC frames have replaced these. Twenty-four are detached, but in the more recent Maple Close there are pairs and threesomes without the parapet detail. Two larger houses in the same materials step down towards the Gavenny opposite the Old Mill. There are two blocks that are probably social housing, on Maple Close and at Chestnut Court.

On the opposite bank of the river the Old Mill, Mill Cottage and Mill House are a listed group of buildings. The first two are 18th-century whitewashed rubble sandstone while late 19th-century Mill House is stone with red brick detailing. Y Stiwdio is a recent recording studio in timber.

Heritage Assets

The original hospital building, the chapel, the lodge and the shelters are listed grade 2. These, together with the extensions to the main building, the grounds around the buildings and in the Gavenny valley, five detached modern houses and the two replica lodge-like houses are within a conservation area. The remainder of the modern housing is a creditable response to the Victorian buildings and the qualities of the site, but of no great merit, perhaps apart from Laburnum Walk town houses which echo the old main building.

The group of mill buildings on the north bank of the Gavenny is also listed.