

# Aberystwyth: Understanding Urban Character



Llywodraeth Cymru  
Welsh Government



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# Introduction

## Aims of the Study

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Historic character lies at the heart of local distinctiveness and sense of place. No two places share a history, so every place has a unique historic character, which is a powerful asset in regeneration. Responding to local character is an important objective of good design; sustaining it can bring social, economic and environmental benefits.

Urban characterization is a tool that can help us use historic character to create sustainable and distinctive places for the future. It aims to describe and explain the historic character of towns, to give a focus to local distinctiveness and help realize the full value of the historic environment. It seeks to: inform and support positive planning, regeneration and conservation programmes; help improve the quality of planning advice; and contribute to local interpretation and education strategies.

Urban characterization defines the unique historic character of individual towns and identifies the variety of character within them. It looks at the history of a town and identifies its expression in patterns of space and connection and in traditions of building, which are the fundamental ingredients of historic character.

The immediate purpose of this study is to inform plans that are coming forward as part of the strategic regeneration of Aberystwyth. By helping to define the special character of the town, it will also offer a common platform for all policies and programmes that will contribute to sustaining and enhancing local character.

## A note on street names

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Many streets in Aberystwyth have changed their names several times over the years. To avoid confusion, this report uses the modern names throughout.

*Aberystwyth from Pen Dinas (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*





# Historical Background



*Above: The gracious sweep of The Promenade, framed by rocky promontories and with a backdrop of hills, as seen by H. Humphreys in 1855 (The National Library of Wales).*

*'It is impossible on entering Aberystwyth, to catch the first glimpse of it unaccompanied with the most vivid sensations of wonder and delight.'*<sup>1</sup>

## Origins

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*Right: The castle and later development within the limits defined by the town walls, adjacent to the harbour (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

Although at first sight, Aberystwyth has all the character of a nineteenth-century seaside town, in fact it has a much more venerable history, as one of the first castle towns established by Edward I. Aberystwyth was founded in 1277; built by Edward's brother Edmund of Lancaster, it comprised from the outset a castle and a tightly planned walled town, sited to take advantage of the harbour facilities offered by the mouth of the river Rheidol. Despite destruction during a Welsh revolt in 1282, the town walls and castle were substantially complete by 1289.<sup>2</sup>





*Left: Plas Crug, romantically assumed to incorporate a medieval castle, but probably an eighteenth-century folly (The National Library of Wales).*

*Bottom: The Iron Age hillfort of Pen Dinas dominates Aberystwyth from the south (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

This was not the first fortification in the area: the Iron Age hillfort of Pen Dinas occupies the hill top between the rivers Rheidol and Ystwyth, and there was an early twelfth-century Norman castle built by Gilbert Fitz Richard on the south-west bank of the Ystwyth overlooking its original mouth (Tan y Castell or Old Aberystwyth Castle). A settlement beside this castle was mentioned in 1197 when town and castle were both seized by Maelgwyn, one of the sons of Lord Rhys. A second castle (Aber-rheidol) was built around 1158 by Roger Fitz Richard, but was destroyed by the Lord Rhys in 1164. The site of this second fortification is unknown, and although there is a tradition that the tower of Plas Crug (demolished in 1967) was this earlier defensive structure, it is more likely to have been an eighteenth-century folly than a medieval fortification.<sup>3</sup>



The town itself may not have been the first settlement on the present site, as there is some evidence for the displacement of an existing population. The site may have formed a demesne of the Welsh lords of the area, and it is possible that a community had settled on both banks of the Rheidol and was involved in limited commercial activity before the establishment of the new town.<sup>4</sup> The settlement associated with the prestigious monastic church at Llanbadarn was also important. The new town maintained a symbolic association with this mother settlement, and was known as Llanbadarn Gaerog (or fortified Llanbadarn) until about 1400, when the name Aberystwyth was first used. It was part of the parish of Llanbadarn until the late nineteenth century.





*Above: The wharves and quay wall on the west side of the harbour were first built in 1858 (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

Like other towns of the Edwardian conquest, Aberystwyth was set up with the makings of a viable urban economy based on land and trade. Edward I's choice of site had the prospect of a good harbour, enabling the town to be sustained by trade. It had a mill by 1278 and extensive landholdings outside the walls. The original charter, consolidated in a subsequent grant of 1303, gave the town's burgesses valuable trading privileges, establishing a market and annual fairs, and requiring all trade between the rivers Aeron and Dyfi to be transacted within the town.<sup>5</sup>

The castle ruins are the only standing structures to survive from this early period, but the pattern of streets laid down when the town was first created is intact and, within it, a distinctive pattern of plots of land (burgages) can still be traced in many parts of the town.

The charter granted in 1277 made provision for the construction of defences for the town and a ditch was begun in 1278. By 1280, stone walls encompassed an area of just under 20 hectares (50 acres).<sup>6</sup> The line of the walls and ditch is still followed by King Street, Baker Street, Chalybeate Street, Mill Street and South Road. There was a gate at the foot of Great Darkgate Street (hence the name), at the junction with North Parade

where it is intersected by the line of Baker Street and Chalybeate Street, and another at the foot of Bridge Street adjacent to the bridge. There was a third at the end of Eastgate, but no access by gate to the shore from the seaward end of Pier Street until much later. The walls survived in part until the early nineteenth century, when the gates were finally removed and the remnants of the walls extensively quarried for building work. Their precise line has yet to be recovered, but fragments have sometimes been revealed in building work, and there has been limited excavation.<sup>7</sup>



*Above: Although the town walls themselves have long disappeared, their position is still clearly marked in the street pattern. The grid of streets enclosed by the walls also survives in the modern townscape (© Next Perspectives: Welsh Government 2009).*

*Left: Medieval burgages are still clearly visible in this nineteenth-century map (The National Library of Wales).*



*Possible eighteenth-century survivals on Bridge Street (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*Early nineteenth-century town planning: Laura Place (The National Library of Wales).*



*The Assembly Rooms in Laura Place, one of the developments commissioned by the Powells of Nanteos (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



Within the walls, the original plan for the town comprised a simple grid in which a single north-south street (now Bridge Street/Pier Street) led from a bridge across the Rheidol and staggered where it met the main east-west street (Great Darkgate Street and upper Great Darkgate Street). Two lesser streets ran parallel to this — Eastgate and Queen Street — the latter probably originally no more than a track. The main streets were set out with a series of burgages — the long linear plots that are characteristic of medieval towns: 120 of these plots were occupied in 1300, and 144 by 1310.<sup>8</sup>

The area within the walls comfortably contained the town for several centuries. It included two substantial areas of common land on either side of Bridge Street and there were other open areas behind the properties on Pier Street. These areas remained undeveloped until the end of the eighteenth century, nor was any building permitted on the common land, which lay beyond the walls, until 1797.

## The Lost Centuries

When we walk round Aberystwyth today, we can trace patterns of medieval land use and look at buildings that reflect the fortunes of the town during the nineteenth century, but the five centuries in between have left little visible trace. We know from the documentary record that Aberystwyth was quickly rivalled by Cardigan and Carmarthen. Despite early commercial privileges, and the boost later provided by the local lead industry, it did not really prosper. It was burnt by Owain Glyndŵr in 1401, taken by his forces in 1404 and retaken by the English in 1408. When John Leland visited in the 1530s, he found the walls to be in a ruinous state. In the late sixteenth century, there were only 'three or four-score inhabited houses and as many if not more uninhabited dwellings in decay'.<sup>9</sup>

In the seventeenth century, a mint was briefly established in the castle, using silver derived from local ores. Then, during the Civil War, the castle was held for the Royalists, taken by the Parliamentarian forces after a siege, and deliberately ruined in 1649. It was perhaps not surprising that Aberystwyth seemed 'a miserable market town'<sup>10</sup> in the following year, but at least

the presence of its market sustained it: 'The town is very long and ill-built... hath a very great market for corn, wool, cheese and provisions, supplying several counties therewith'.<sup>11</sup>

Documents suggest some revival in its fortunes from the end of the seventeenth century, and the construction of a town hall (in use by 1693)<sup>12</sup> may have symbolized growing confidence. By 1726, the town was populous but 'a very dirty black, smoaky place'.<sup>13</sup> Aberystwyth benefited from the growth of trade associated with lead mining in its hinterland, and was clearly a regional trading capital in the later eighteenth century, though the tradition that the first bank in Wales was established here in 1762 may be erroneous.<sup>14</sup> It is from the mid-late eighteenth century that the first unmistakable signs of changing fortunes can be traced in the present townscape. Its oldest surviving buildings date from this period.

## 'The Brighton of Wales': A Town of Leisure'<sup>15</sup>

*'The great influx of strangers... continually increasing, has caused a considerable number of houses to be built, and some in a style of superior elegance.'*<sup>16</sup>

If Aberystwyth was well-placed to share in any economic prosperity derived from regional industry, there were other cultural trends at work: firstly, as the town became fashionable with the gentry, and secondly, as it acquired a new cachet as a seaside resort.

The Powells of Nanteos were one of the pre-eminent local families and, as significant property holders within the town, were influential in some aspects of its development in the early decades of the nineteenth century; most notably at Laura Place, where Assembly Rooms were built in 1820, and two rows of houses in about 1827. The estate also owned property on Pier Street and Eastgate, as well as in the areas of New Street and Market Street, and it was building here between 1809 and 1832. There are still buildings in these areas that display the signature of the estate.<sup>17</sup> The Gogerddan estate also played a prominent



*Crynfryn House on Eastgate was the town house of the Bonsall family, before it became a hospital in the mid-nineteenth century (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*Built for the Pughs of Abermad, this house was one of several gentry houses on Bridge Street, a fashionable residential street in the early nineteenth century (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



role in the affairs of the town. The Pryses of Gogerddan had a town house here in the seventeenth century (Ty Mawr, formerly on the corner of Eastgate and Pier Street on the site that is now occupied by The St David's Club), but by the early nineteenth century this had been replaced by a large house on Bridge Street (Loveden House, 26 Bridge Street). Also on Bridge Street was the town house of the Pughs of Abermad (Westminster). Although Bridge Street was probably the most fashionable location, there were also gentry town houses elsewhere in the town; for example Crynfryn House on Eastgate began life as the town house of the Bonsalls of Fronfraith, before being rebuilt or remodelled as a hospital sometime between 1858 and 1867.<sup>18</sup>

Meanwhile, Castle House was the first house to be built on former common land within, or possibly just outside, the walls. Designed by John Nash for Uvedale Price and completed in 1796, it was a picturesque curiosity and probably played an important part in putting Aberystwyth on the tourist map.<sup>19</sup> As visitors descended on the town, its three old-established inns (The Gogerddan Arms, The Talbot, and The Black Lion) were soon supplemented by other hotels, as well as a distinctive new seaside building type —



*Marine Terrace, with the former marine baths in the distance (Ceredigion Museum, Aberystwyth).*

houses built specifically for letting. Aberystwyth's development as a seaside resort proceeded rapidly in the early decades of the nineteenth century, focussed initially on Marine Terrace where the first five houses had been built by 1806. This 'sweet level space, situated on the margin of the sea, which nature has formed a perfect crescent, and Art has embellished with light and elegant structures'<sup>20</sup> had stretched beyond the present Terrace Road by the 1820s. By 1848, there were 60 houses stretching in a continuous curve as far as what is now Albert Place — 'modern-built houses, let as lodgings, either entire or in apartments'.<sup>21</sup>

Other important components of a successful resort were bathing facilities and promenading

opportunities. Dr Rice-Williams leased part of the waste land known as Bryn Diodde (marked by the rocky spur close to the site of the present shelter on The Promenade) to establish a marine baths in 1809. The baths were complete with a boiler to heat the water, cold plunging baths, a shower bath, vapour bath, chambers and sitting rooms.<sup>22</sup> Bathing machines were also available. At about the same time, Mr Probart, steward to the Powys estate, had leased the site of the castle and laid out walks there 'planned with some taste and ingenuity'.<sup>23</sup> Then, in 1819, the construction of a promenade was initiated by public subscription.<sup>24</sup> By about this time too, there was a 'pleasant walk' by Plas Crug to Llanbadarn, taking in the Chalybeate well, which had been discovered in 1779.<sup>25</sup>



*Trefechan Bridge and the harbour, as depicted by Henry Gastineau in the 1830s (The National Library of Wales).*



*A harbour was an important attribute of Aberystwyth's economy from the outset. It was redeveloped and enlarged to keep pace with changing needs in the nineteenth century (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



## A Town of Trade

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Meanwhile, Aberystwyth also prospered as a trading town. A general increase in economic activity in the town was here, as elsewhere, fed by industrial developments in its hinterland, and in particular by the development of lead mining. Aberystwyth was the principal port for the export of lead from mines in the Ystwyth valley and elsewhere. A revival of coastal trade is suggested by the transfer of the custom house from Aberdyfi in 1763, and the establishment of a harbour trust in 1780, though improvements to the harbour were not initiated until 1835.

The river Rheidol had been an important asset to the town since its foundation. It provided a secure harbour, which was a haven for ship building. As a

harbour, though, Aberystwyth was not without its problems, since a sandbar at its entrance barred entry for larger vessels. An Act of Parliament in 1780 granted powers 'to repair, enlarge and preserve' the harbour, but it was several decades before any serious improvement works were put in hand.<sup>26</sup> By 1840, however, 'nothing in Aberystwyth so powerfully exhibits the march of its improvements than the works at the New Harbour. That it is a great ornament to the town is beside the present question, its utility being the point particularly here adverted to'.<sup>27</sup> Works had started in 1836 with the construction of a stone pier on the south side of the harbour to protect its entrance, facilitated by a new road bridging the river Ystwyth and connecting with an embankment to Alltwen at the far side of the south beach, where stone for this pier was quarried.<sup>28</sup>



In 1858 this pier was extended, and wharves and a quay wall built on the west side of the harbour along the line of Ro Fawr, the shingle bank running south from the castle. Warehouses were built there, and a saw mill and timber yard established at its town end.<sup>29</sup> Further improvements followed in the 1870s, with repairs and extensions to the pier: this time, the stone was brought in from Ystrad Meurig on the Manchester and Milford Railway, via a branch line connecting directly to the harbour on the bridge across the Ystwyth.<sup>30</sup> By this time, however, the railway itself was carrying much of the trade that might once have sustained the harbour, and its trading role gradually declined.

Aberystwyth had been a market town since its foundation in 1277, and the crossroads at the centre of the walled town was for long the main focus of trading activity. This was the site of the seventeenth-century town hall, which was demolished in 1770. Its replacement, which accommodated a market in its open lower storey, was in turn demolished in 1885. Nearby, a covered meat market was built on land in St James's Square in 1823. Then, in 1835, the new Improvement Commission for the town resolved that 'the stalls and standing places near to and about the town hall used by hawkers, hatters and the sellers of fruit, vegetables etc, by reason of their obstructing the footways be removed to the new market house in Market Street'.<sup>31</sup> This

was the corn market, built in 1832 and rebuilt twice in the nineteenth century before being demolished and replaced by the Pantyfedwen Trust building in 1966–67. The building in St James' Square served as the meat market until the Smithfield was opened close to the railway in 1870.<sup>32</sup>

By this time, permanent shops had assumed considerable importance in the economy of the town. Some particularly fine early examples have survived on Bridge Street and Pier Street, but right across the town there is an exceptionally good sequence of shopfronts from throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is only on Great Darkgate Street where commercial pressures in the later twentieth century have taken their toll, and even here some good examples of earlier commercial buildings have survived.

*Above left: A fine example of an early shopfront surviving in an early nineteenth-century building on Bridge Street (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

*Above right: This archway on Eastgate gives access to a court of cottages built behind the main street (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

## Building the Town: Urban Growth and Civic Initiative

To accommodate this burgeoning urban life, Aberystwyth grew very rapidly between about 1800 and 1840. Building outside the medieval walls was permitted for the first time in 1797. In that year, the first Bethel Chapel was built on Baker Street, and several pieces of ground



*Crynfryn Buildings were built on land that was once the garden at the back of Crynfryn House (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*Crynfryn Row was originally built along the boundary of the garden behind Crynfryn House on Eastgate; probably respecting the original line of the town walls (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

outside the Great Darkgate were leased for building. The first of these was on the site now occupied by the National Westminster Bank and others followed along what became North Parade. Meanwhile, as we have seen, development was also underway along Marine Terrace. At the same time, there was growing pressure on the common land that lay within the walls. Development of High Street (the former Penmaesglas common) began in 1792, when, as compensation for the demolition of a house projecting over the pavement in Great Darkgate Street, its owner, John Parry, received a plot of land for building.<sup>33</sup> Thereafter, back lanes and even some of the old burgages were also built up. One of the earliest coherent developments of a back-land plot was Crynfryn Row, built by Sir Thomas Bonsall against the boundary of his town-house garden and close to the line of the town walls. The houses appear to have been rebuilt, but the terrace survives, together with a later one also built in the former garden. Some new streets were also created: New Street and Market Street were both laid out in the 1830s, both on land belonging to the Powells of Nanteos.





Much of the land released for building in the nineteenth century belonged to the town corporation. Having defended their rights to this common grazing land throughout the eighteenth century, they at last conceded that it might be more profitably developed for building. This process was carefully controlled through leasing rather than sale. We get a glimpse of this on what became High Street, where the second lease specified that seven houses 'of the same size and dimensions' as those built by John Parry on the adjacent plot should be built.<sup>34</sup>

Meanwhile, on former marshland on the east side of the town — also owned by the corporation — development took a coherently planned form, with a grid of new streets laid out between the line of the walls and the limit of town land at the foot of Penglais Hill. This grid comprised the lines

of Terrace Road and Queen's Road, with Marine Terrace, Corporation Street and Bath Street, Portland Street, Great Darkgate Street, Cambrian Street and Alexandra Road. These lines are clearly shown on a map of 1809,<sup>35</sup> when there had already been some development on the north side of North Parade, but the allocation of building leases elsewhere in the area did not get under way until 1813.

In 1835, a reformed corporation took over the administration of the town, accompanied by an Improvement Commission established in the same year. The latter was responsible for the establishment of the town water supply from a new reservoir built in Bryn y Mor dingle in 1837, and for gas lighting — the town gasworks was opened in 1838, just outside the town walls behind Mill Street.<sup>36</sup>

*High Street was one of the first new streets to be set out for development within the limits of the medieval town. Building began there at the end of the eighteenth century and, despite remodelling and rebuilding, some of the original buildings probably survive (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*





*Above: Part of Marine Terrace and The Promenade, as depicted in 1867. The long terrace had recently been rebuilt: its predecessor was only two-storied (The National Library of Wales).*

*Right: Aberystwyth looking south, in 1869. The Queen's Hotel marked the limit of development along The Promenade at this time, though The Promenade and sea wall had already been constructed (The National Library of Wales).*

## After the Railway

A period of rapid growth had come to an end by about 1840, but the arrival of the Cambrian Railway in 1864 and the Manchester and Milford Railway three years later provided a new boost to the fortunes of the town and ushered in another period of expansion. This was not simply confined to new building projects and the physical enlargement of the town's limits; many existing buildings were replaced during the nineteenth century — indeed many plots were probably redeveloped more than once.

In the 1860s and 1870s a great deal of housing was either built or rebuilt: for example, it is to these decades that much of the present character of Portland Street, Portland Road, the south side of North Parade, and New Street belongs. Large sections of The Promenade were also remodelled in this period. Development of the northern end of Marine Terrace was also initiated following construction of The Queen's Hotel in 1864: 'The Queens Hotel and a new and beautiful line

of terrace has been laid out, which is protected against the fury of the winter seas by an excellently constructed wall, ornamented with bastions and surmounted by a double line of iron railings. The building of this wall effected one of the most important improvements in the town, completing as it did the contour of the terrace, reclaiming from the sea a long and gradually increasing building ground'.<sup>37</sup>





*Top left: Although Portland Street and Portland Road had been laid out by the 1830s, they were subject to considerable redevelopment after the arrival of the railway, which gave a boost to the economy of the town in the 1860s and 1870s (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

*Top right: Developments on Victoria Terrace at the north end of The Promenade began in the late 1860s, and were completed with the construction of Alexandra Hall in 1896 (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*Middle left: The Queen's Hotel was built with great style and high ambition, but proved short-lived as a hotel (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

*Middle right: Beyond The Queen's Hotel, this terrace set the precedent for a change of style, though the original polychrome brickwork has unfortunately been painted over (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

This building ground was the subject of ambitious plans drawn up by J. P. Seddon in 1865. These were watered down to comprise a row of 25 houses in 1868, but only three had been built by 1871, and although the terrace continued in gothic style, it was an altogether simpler affair and was not completed until the building of Alexandra Hall in 1896.<sup>38</sup>

In this period, too, the Powells of Nanteos developed their land between Mill Street and Queen Street; and so Powell Street, William Street and George Street all came into being (there is a tradition that they were built to house railway workers, and they were certainly intended as artisan houses). Development of Penmaesglas around High Street and Custom House Street was also consolidated in this period, again largely as artisan housing, but here with strong maritime links.

This was a time of high ambition, but some extravagant projects spectacularly failed. Foremost amongst these was The Castle Hotel: 'This most exotic of High Victorian Buildings has



*Left: Distinctive cottages on land belonging to the Powells of Nanteos developed from the 1860s (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*Left: The streets in the harbour quarter of the town (Penmaesglas) were largely built up during the 1860s and 1870s (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*The Castle Hotel was one of the most extravagant building projects of the 1860s — short-lived as a hotel, it secured a future as The University College of Wales (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



an extraordinary history to match'.<sup>39</sup> In 1864, Castle House was acquired by Thomas Savin, railway promoter, to form the core of a massive tourist hotel. Two years later, Savin had gone bankrupt and the hotel remained unfinished, 'a melancholy monument of the money market panic in 1865'.<sup>40</sup> The Queen's Hotel, 'one of the finest buildings of its class',<sup>41</sup> was built at the same time, but it too failed and was sold in 1877, though continued in use as a hotel until 1945.<sup>42</sup> The pier was also begun at this time, in 1864, but the pavilion was not provided until a second phase of development, in 1896.

It is very clear from the surviving building stock that the town was booming in the years around 1900. In 1895, the mayor observed that 'during the past two years, Aberystwyth has passed through a stage before unknown to living man... It was a little mine

of gold'.<sup>43</sup> As well as prominent civic projects such as The Hotel Cambria (1895), the reconstruction of the pier, and The Cliff Railway (1896) — all the work of The Aberystwyth Improvement Company — there are many private and commercial enterprises dating from this period. With their distinctive building materials (often incorporating materials imported by railway such as Ruabon brick and tile) and new styles (departing from the traditional Georgian, which had hitherto dominated the town), they are an important element in the historic character of the town.

In this period again, there was extensive redevelopment, both within the existing confines of the town and also expansion without, as the suburbs at The Buarth, Llanbadam Road and North Road areas were built up.<sup>44</sup>



*Above: One of the most striking of the flamboyant commercial buildings from around 1900 (Ceredigion Museum, Aberystwyth).*



*Left: Red brick from Ruabon made its appearance in Aberystwyth after the arrival of the railway and contributes handsomely to the character of the town (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*The National Library of Wales, crowning the hillside above the town (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



## A Town of Learning

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One of the major influences on the growth and character of Aberystwyth from the end of the nineteenth century was The University College of Wales, which was established in the premises of the ill-fated Castle Hotel in 1872. This was the fruition of a long campaign for a university for Wales, which had its beginnings in 1854. Hugh Owen was the leading light in this campaign, which in the late 1860s received new energy and also funds, which were forthcoming from working people. Various locations for a university college were proposed, but it was the

cheap availability of a suitable building that gave Aberystwyth the edge. Nonetheless, government support of the college was slow in coming and even when the principle of university colleges for Wales was accepted in 1882, Aberystwyth was not at first given equal status with the colleges established in Cardiff and Bangor. The hotel buildings were gradually extended and rebuilt as funds allowed and as fire damage in 1886 necessitated. Castle House itself was replaced in 1896–98. The college went on to acquire land on The Buarth, where laboratories (now the School of Art) were built in 1905–07, and at Penglais in 1929, where building began in the late 1930s.



The National Library had an even longer gestation: beginning with the library established by the Society of Cymmrodorion in the mid-eighteenth century, then formalized in a proposal (made at the National Eisteddfod in 1858) for a museum and record office for Welsh manuscripts and books. Hugh Owen was again instrumental in developing this suggestion in 1873, linking the would-be library to the new University College. The idea did not come to fruition until the early twentieth century, and although Cardiff also asserted a claim to house a national library, Aberystwyth already had a site, a fine collection of books and manuscripts, and substantial donations. It was confirmed as the location for the library in 1905 and received a Charter of Incorporation in 1907. The collections were housed in the Assembly Rooms at Laura Place until a new building was available. Work started in 1911: the first phase was completed in 1916, the second in 1937.

In addition to their immense contribution to Welsh cultural life, these institutions have provided Aberystwyth with some exceptional buildings and landscapes. They probably also set the tone for the distinctive suburban developments at Llanbadarn Road, The Buarth, and North Road.

## The Twentieth Century

The corporation of Aberystwyth in the nineteenth century had been unusually enterprising in its approach to building development and control, resulting in well-planned urban growth. It also took an enlightened approach to the direct provision of housing, with an early venture in direct building by the town council in the 1870s, when Gogerddan Cottages at the foot of Penglais Hill were built under a scheme that enabled occupiers to become the owners of their houses.<sup>45</sup> This was followed in the early years of the twentieth century with other examples of municipal enterprise: beginning with Greenfield Street in 1904 and continuing in campaigns of slum clearance in Skinner Street, Poplar Row and Trinity Row, then Glanrafon Terrace and Spring Gardens, Trefechan, in 1912. The old barracks at the foot of Penglais Hill was acquired by the council and converted into housing in the same year.<sup>46</sup>

The council was responsible for much more extensive development at Penparcau during the inter-war years. In the same period there was limited private building, especially on the east side of the town, where Elysian Grove was developed in the 1930s.<sup>47</sup> The town continued to expand beyond the university campus with a mixture of public and private development after the Second World War.

*Housing along the riverside at Trefechan, built in the early years of the twentieth century by the town council (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*





*Aberystwyth boasted not just a fine seafront, but an inland landscape of considerable diversity and interest, which offered a range of opportunities for leisurely exploration, as depicted in this 1850s image (The National Library of Wales).*

# Historical Topography



## Landscape and Setting

Aberystwyth enjoys a remarkable setting on a rocky promontory jutting out of a low-lying coastal plain close to the mouths of two rivers. The coastal scenery to either side of the town is dramatic. Inland, beyond the flood plain of the river Rheidol, the land rises quickly towards the Cambrian Mountains. The town, therefore, was effectively enclosed by higher ground beyond a natural moat of marsh and flood plain, whilst also enjoying a long exposure to the sea. This natural topography has profoundly influenced the development of the town, offering a secure haven and stronghold in medieval times, and a rich source of picturesque experiences as it developed as a resort. Although the town developed onto marshland during the nineteenth century, its growth was constrained by the flood plain of the Rheidol until comparatively recently. Construction of the Cwm Rheidol Reservoir and power station controlled flooding, but opened a floodgate to development on the valley floor in the later twentieth century, dragging the focus away from the historic urban core, and blurring the edges of this highly distinctive historic town.

## The Structure of the Medieval Town

The heart of Aberystwyth is a medieval walled and planned town. Although the walls have disappeared, their line can still be clearly traced; the medieval street layout is intact, and the original plot structure set out in the late thirteenth century survives in some areas. The main streets were: Bridge Street–Pier Street, Great Darkgate Street and Eastgate, whilst Queen Street was just a back lane. The junction of the two main streets was traditionally the site of the market, and it is possible that the area between upper Great Darkgate Street and Princess Street was originally open as a market space. There is no clear surviving plot structure in this area, which may be an indication that it was built up through encroachment onto hitherto open space.

The typical layout of burgages clearly survives in some areas of the town, especially the west side of Bridge Street, on Pier Street to the north of New Street, in part on the south side of Great Darkgate Street, and on its north to the east of Market Street. Furthermore, this historical plot structure

*Above left: The steps that descend from Crynfryn Row to Marine Terrace correspond closely to the position of the medieval town wall (Crown Copyright; RCAHMW).*

*Above right: Windmill Court, a remarkable survival of small cottages tucked away behind Eastgate (Crown Copyright; RCAHMW).*



*Top: Laura Place is a formal development of fine Georgian town houses, which were commissioned by the Powells of Nanteos (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

*Bottom: New Street (new in 1828) provides direct access to Laura Place and St Michael's Church (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



is almost everywhere reflected in the building pattern along street frontages, even where the buildings themselves are of much more recent origin — each plot's separate history has resulted in great visual variety. Growth within the walls was also partly contained by this plot structure — the plots themselves provided a framework for development with crowded courts and rows. By the late nineteenth century, this had resulted in a densely populated town centre. Many of these courts and rows were later demolished, but some survive, especially off Eastgate (Windmill Court, Laurel Place), and are important examples of a once typical pattern of urban growth.

Some modifications to this essentially medieval urban structure were made during the nineteenth century, with the creation of new streets. New Street was laid out in about 1828 (probably conceived with the second church of Saint Michael, which was on the same alignment) and Market Street was established in 1832 — both on land belonging to the Powells of Nanteos.

Aberystwyth was unusual in retaining extensive areas of open land within the walls until the end of the eighteenth century — these areas lent themselves to a more formal process of development. In the north-west corner of the town, the Powells of Nanteos had a substantial





*Far left: Marine Terrace, as depicted in the mid-nineteenth century, a crescent of seaside lodgings following the sweep of the bay (The National Library of Wales).*



*Left: North Parade was laid out as a wide new street outside the walls in the early nineteenth century. It was successively developed and redeveloped as the century progressed (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

portion of land, on which the Assembly Rooms and Laura Place were developed in the 1820s, establishing a formal layout around a square bounded on its other sides by St Michael's Church and Castle House. The open space was lost when St Michael's Church was rebuilt on its present site in the 1890s. The Powells also owned land in the south-east corner of the town, where they gave land for St Mary's Church, and built terraces of artisan houses (Powell Street, George Street and William Street) in the 1860s. In the south-west corner of the town lay the former Penmaesglas common, which belonged to the corporation and was developed on leases.

## Outside the Walls: New Development Patterns

The land outside the walls was largely common land belonging to the town. It was marshy and remained undeveloped for several centuries, though minor industrial sites, essential to sustain the economy of the town, had probably long-occupied the area immediately outside the walls close to Trefechan Bridge. Here was a mill — perhaps on a site occupied since the late thirteenth century (though there are no records of a mill here before

the sixteenth century), but demolished during the nineteenth century. It was supplied by a leat, which until it was filled in following construction of the railway and during improvements by the council, ran from Plas Crug; thence north alongside what is now Plas Crug Avenue (where it has been replaced by a small ditch), before running alongside the present Alexandra Road and skirting the line of the town walls below Mill Street. Close to the mill were other industrial buildings, including a tannery. It was here that the town gasworks was established in 1838.

From the nineteenth century, expansion beyond the medieval town core was carefully controlled by the corporation. It proceeded in several distinct campaigns, each of which has its own character. The majestic curve of Marine Terrace is essentially linear, but it formed the northern limit of a coherent grid of streets to either side of North Parade, laid out and gradually developed over the course of several decades during the nineteenth century. The original layout allowed for two major streets (Portland Street and North Parade) with service roads between them. When this area was redeveloped in the 1860s and 1870s, these service roads themselves became residential streets (Portland Road and Cambrian Street). Later suburban developments of The Buarth, North Road and Llanbadarn Road were also well planned and coherently laid out.



*Top: Trefechan was an early suburb where many trades and industries were concentrated, their yards rubbing shoulders with cottages and some larger houses (Ceredigion Museum, Aberystwyth).*

*Right: This former malthouse with its kiln is one of the few surviving industrial buildings at Trefechan (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



To the south-east of the town, low-lying marshland had been drained and laid out in a series of regular fields by the early nineteenth century. This area remained largely undeveloped until the arrival of the railway in 1864.

Thereafter, other developments best suited to an out-of-town location, such as the Smithfield and slaughter house, another tannery and a foundry, were established here. Notwithstanding the essentially working aspect of this area, the council's new road of about 1870, which led to the Smithfield, was broad and 'margined with trees'.<sup>48</sup> This line was eventually extended as Boulevard St Briec and Rhodfa Padarn.

## Trefechan: An Early Suburb

Meanwhile, at Trefechan, an extra-mural suburb grew up, perhaps with medieval origins. By the nineteenth century, Trefechan housed many of the industrial activities that sustained both harbour and town, including limekilns, timber yards and sawmills, boat building yards and a brewery. In the midst of all this industry, and the rows of cottages related to it, was a formally designed pair of substantial eighteenth-century town houses (The Green and The Lawn). Development here was probably more haphazard than elsewhere, though many of its industrial premises occupied substantial compounds, which lent a distinctive character to the area. Trefechan had also become quite crowded by the late nineteenth century, with a series of courts behind the street line, and poor-quality housing.<sup>49</sup> Old photographs record several small vernacular cottages, but these traces of its history were cleared away in successive campaigns of renewal during the twentieth century, Trefechan was an important focus for housing development by the council.





*The arrival of the railway encouraged some commercial development away from the heart of the medieval town, including some flamboyant commercial architecture using imported building materials (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*Far left: Bridge Street was the focus for high-status housing in the town until at least the middle of the nineteenth century (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

*Left: Great Darkgate Street became the commercial heart of the town from the mid-nineteenth century — a role it retains. Commercial pressures resulted in the loss of many of its older buildings during the twentieth century (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

## Topography and Social Structure

Shifting social patterns accompanied this physical topography. Bridge Street and Pier Street had formed the principal axis of the medieval town and this was a fashionable place of residence until the mid-nineteenth century, when it was displaced in importance firstly by Marine Terrace and its environs, and later by the suburbs to the east of the town. There was a parallel shift in the geography of commerce. The crossroads in the centre of the old town was originally the principal trading area, and Bridge Street and Pier Street were the initial focus for permanent shops (Pier Street was rather extravagantly described as ‘the Regent Street of Aberystwyth’

in 1874).<sup>50</sup> Once the town began to grow outside the walls along North Parade, however, Great Darkgate Street assumed greater importance for commerce, accompanied by greater pressure for redevelopment, especially during the twentieth century. Meanwhile, behind the main streets, the town centre began to fill up with smaller artisan houses, just as new suburbs were being established with spacious houses for the wealthier classes.

Outside the walls, both the sea front and the grid of streets to either side of North Parade developed with houses, many of which served Aberystwyth’s role as a resort. With the arrival of the railway, Terrace Road assumed a greater prominence in the commercial life of the town as the main axis from the railway station to the sea — it was here that many ambitious developments of the early twentieth century were concentrated.



# The Character of Building

*Right: This building may have seventeenth-century origins, making it one of the earliest surviving buildings in the town. When it was listed in 1987, it still retained a seventeenth-century staircase (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*Far right: The Nag's Head (top) and The Old Black Lion (bottom) belong to a handful of buildings in the town centre that may have pre-nineteenth-century origins (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*Right: The smaller scale of these buildings on Great Darkgate Street, suggest that they may be considerably earlier than their neighbours (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



## The Chronology of Development

Although in origin a medieval town, its building stock lends Aberystwyth a strong nineteenth-century character. There are, however, a few buildings in the town which might on closer investigation prove earlier than 1800. Bridge Street was one of the principal streets of the medieval town and retained a significant

social role into the early nineteenth century, but thereafter declined in importance. Some early buildings might be expected to have survived here, and The Old Black Lion and the block including The Nag's Head in particular, may have early origins. Elsewhere on the medieval streets, development pressure from about 1800 onwards has been more intensive, but 39–41 Great Darkgate Street are pre-1800 (there is an early eighteenth-century staircase in number 39), and 18 Great Darkgate Street may be another example.



*The Angel Hotel, before it was remodelled in the early twentieth century. It is an example of the building styles and traditions that were once prevalent in the town (Ceredigion Museum, Aberystwyth).*



*Far left: A polite Georgian tradition dominated the architecture of Aberystwyth until the end of the nineteenth century. It was characterized by symmetry, sash windows and restrained render detailing (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

After about 1800, more buildings survive, though such was the prosperity of the town in the later nineteenth century, that many houses built in the first phase of renewed growth (about 1800–40) were either completely rebuilt or comprehensively remodelled in later phases (about 1860–70 and 1895–1905). There is photographic evidence for a vernacular building style which has not survived at all, and examples of virtually unaltered early nineteenth-century buildings in the Georgian tradition are relatively scarce. Much more common is a re-working of



*Left: By the end of the nineteenth century, a taste for exposed stone with imported brick and even tile, was combined with greater freedom of style, introducing considerable variety into the urban building stock (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

this tradition in the mid-nineteenth century, or the exuberant reconstruction in new styles and materials at the turn of the century. Aberystwyth is also particularly notable for its late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century suburbs.



*Shopfront detail on the corner of Pier Street and Eastgate (Crown Copyright; RCAHMW).*

## Building Types

### Shops and Blocks

Permanent shops were a feature of Aberystwyth from at least the early nineteenth century, and exceptionally good examples of early shopfronts survive. Some of these comprised a simple composition of doorway and flanking bow windows, contained in an architrave with delicate classical mouldings. A more ambitious design applied an architectural treatment to the whole of the lower storey: examples such as those at 17–19 Pier Street and Bridge Street/Queen Street corner are rare, even in a Welsh context. From the mid-nineteenth century, conventions for shopfront design became more standardized, with larger windows (following the introduction of plate glass) and a bigger projecting fascia (sometimes incorporating an awning), but there was still scope for considerable variety in the detailing of the fascia and the brackets at either end of it.



*A fine early shopfront on Bridge Street (Crown Copyright; RCAHMW).*



*Far right: A fine shopfront, with classical detail, wrapped around the corner of Queen Street and Bridge Street (Crown Copyright; RCAHMW).*



*Right: A carved console bracket on a shopfront on Eastgate (Crown Copyright; RCAHMW).*







*Top, middle and bottom right: Aberystwyth boasts many high-quality shopfronts such as these (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*Far left: Eastgate — smaller shops had only modest fronts (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

Humbler shops on lesser streets simply had an enlarged window contained in a simple architrave: examples survive on Eastgate. By the end of the nineteenth century, more ornamental frontages were introduced, with the whole façade treated as an architectural composition in buildings designed, rather than adapted for, commerce (Dukes Drapers, Smiths). This process ultimately

*Right: Designed for commerce (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*Far right: An early bank incorporated in a domestic building on Bridge Street (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

led to the adoption of signature styles for some companies — Aberystwyth retains a good example of a building in the Burton house style, for example.

A similar development can be traced in banks in the town: the earliest is Bank House on Bridge Street, which is a fine Georgian residence incorporating a bank, but with all the appearance of a house — only the paired doorways suggest its real function. The bank is said to have been founded in 1762, but as the first reference to the establishment of 'The Aberystwyth and Cardiganshire Bank' is in 1806, the building could well be of this date.<sup>51</sup> By about 1900, banks were uniformly adopting distinctive built forms, employing architects to design them and often using imported building materials.







*Purpose-designed banks from the early twentieth century (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*





Right and below left: *The Old Black Lion (right) and the former Gogerddan Arms (below) — their domestic Georgian style was typical of hotel buildings before the middle of the nineteenth century (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



Far right: *By contrast, The Queen's Hotel of 1866 was built on a grand scale in an assertive French architectural style (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



## Hotels, Inns and Lodging Houses

Accommodation was initially confined to town-centre inns of which The Lion, The Gogerddan Arms and The Talbot were the most notable (though there were many other taverns in the town), before the development of the seaside hotel. The earliest of these was The Belle Vue, though at first it simply comprised 'three houses thrown into one.'<sup>52</sup> The Gogerddan Arms was first recorded in 1743 but, like the others, was extended and remodelled to keep pace with rising demand.<sup>53</sup> Until the mid-nineteenth century, hotels remained in a domestic Georgian tradition, marked out mainly by their scale. Later developments were much more exuberant, and the most famous of these was the former Castle Hotel, built around Castle House on a prodigious scale. Not much less impressive was The Queen's Hotel, which inaugurated the final phase of building along Marine Terrace in 1864.

Until the railway really changed travelling habits, stabling was an important adjunct to a successful hotel: it

survives, at least in part, at both The Belle Vue Hotel and The Queen's Hotel.

In a parallel process, the smaller inn also developed from a modest domestic building to something more flamboyant. There are several examples of the purpose-built public house of the later nineteenth century in Aberystwyth (for example, The Cambrian Hotel, The Coopers Hotel and, probably the best example, The Castle Hotel at the foot of Custom House Street).

The need for dedicated accommodation stimulated the development of the seaside lodging house; these were characteristically tall, with many bay windows to command a sea view. The bay window became an important feature, which was widely adopted even where there was no view; incorporating bay windows, where buildings opened immediately off the pavement, necessitated the use of oriels, both at first-floor level, and also sometimes on the ground floor.



*Distinctive individual styles were also adopted for public houses from the end of the nineteenth century (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*





*The bow or bay window quickly became a hallmark of nineteenth-century building in Aberystwyth — with or without a sea view (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*







*Typical seaside lodging houses on Marine Terrace (Crown Terrace (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW)).*

The development of Marine Terrace spans the whole of the nineteenth century and contains many interpretations of this important seaside building type, but there are many other examples on North Parade and Portland Street, for example.

### Domestic Building Styles

Aberystwyth boasts domestic architecture of a very high order. Urban building types and styles came to the fore, supplanting vernacular traditions of building that were still being applied in some early nineteenth-century building. These vernacular buildings were characterized by their long, relatively low proportions, and by the use of limewash over rubble. During the course of the nineteenth century, building heights increased, and smooth render replaced limewash. Most of the vernacular buildings were replaced in the later nineteenth century or early twentieth century. The few survivals have all been re-clad in render and it is only their proportions that give them away. There are some examples on High Street and Vulcan Street, as well as the few possible eighteenth-century survivals noted earlier on Bridge Street and Great Darkgate Street.



*Variations on this formal Georgian style dominated domestic building in Aberystwyth for most of the nineteenth century (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

Prosperity and aspiration were signalled in the early development of a sophisticated Georgian style, adopted first for the larger gentry houses of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and taken up for more modest buildings thereafter. It proved a remarkably enduring style. It was given different embellishments but not fundamentally challenged until the late nineteenth century, notwithstanding attempts to introduce the gothic revival to the town. After about 1900,

*The gothic style was introduced to the town after the 1860s, as in this terrace on Queen's Road, but it was relatively rare (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*Right: Eastgate — On the older urban streets, the development pattern is characteristically of terraces formed from individual buildings or short rows (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*Far right: North Parade — Longer terraced rows were characteristic of the new streets created in the nineteenth century (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*







a wider choice of materials and styles enabled the play of greater variety in the affluent suburbs.

Within the limits of the medieval town, the characteristic unit of development was the single plot; their development and redevelopment at different times has lent considerable visual variety to the townscape. Some amalgamation of plots in single ownership enabled short terraces to be built (there are examples on Eastgate and Bridge Street). On the newer streets, longer terraces were possible, especially where the land was in single ownership and developed in a single campaign (as for instance on the Powell land between Queen Street and Mill Street, and on New Street). Where building leases were used on town land, the corporation appear to have set out general parameters for development, establishing a frontage line and probably

overall height. The size of lease and date of development varied, and this is reflected in variations along the street lines of North Parade and Portland Street, for example.

Although each of these developments could have been the work of several builders, broad conventions of style were followed, within which there was some room for variations on a common theme. Conformity was reinforced in later nineteenth-century development when the council used renewal of leases to impose certain building standards, including: raising the height of roofs, rendering stone walls, and replacing curved with canted bay windows.<sup>54</sup> By the end of the century, the role of local architects in the design and development of the suburbs is documented in the borough's building control plans.<sup>55</sup>

*Early nineteenth-century bow windows contrasting with the later nineteenth-century canted bays favoured by the town council (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

*Balancing corner buildings on Terrace Road (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*Large houses with a lot of individuality on North Road (right) and Llanbadarn Road (far right) (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



Where the terraced house was the design unit, there seem to have been conventions governing what should or should not vary within each terrace row. The overall rhythm of the façade, the size, spacing and type of windows (including dormers if they were used), were generally standardized. Façade finish could also be shared across a row, but was not always — there is, for example, a row on Cambrian Street comprising one house finished with decorative render, and several finished with terracotta and pebble-dash.

It is clear that there were strong conventions at play in building the town, even where individual plots were developed by different people or at different times. Storey heights and bay width tended to stay within fairly tight parameters, giving a comfortable harmony to the streetscape.

Terrace Road provides a good example of this, where the individual designs of corner buildings are in fact carefully balanced with their opposite numbers.

The suburban developments of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are notable for their variety of style, material and layout. North Road, Llanbadarn Road and the streets adjacent to it were developed with substantial houses for an affluent population — characteristically detached or semi-detached villas with substantial gardens. The Buarth was more tightly developed with terraced housing in a range of sizes, their hierarchy indicated by degrees of architectural enrichment.





*Top left and right and middle left: Suburban variety in size and style (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*Ornament was important for suburban houses — both for the buildings themselves and for their boundaries. Ironwork detail was probably made locally (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



In all these areas, embellishment is common, and particularly noteworthy is the use of architectural ironwork, whether on the houses themselves, or in their boundaries. This was probably the product of local foundries and there is a rich variety of pattern across the town.

Iron railings were usually combined with low boundary walls, but just as there is a range of

materials and styles in the houses themselves, so there is a range of types of boundary treatment; stone was variously dressed and coursed, and often combined with brick or terracotta in a variety of colours. There are also some rare examples in which stone is left rough and unfinished, achieving a picturesque, rustic effect. These varied boundaries make a significant contribution to the character of suburban areas.



*Distinctive boundary walling on The Buarth (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*







*The parish church of the Holy Trinity forms an architectural anchorage for The Buarth (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

## Churches and Chapels

Religious buildings provide something of a barometer of the cultural, social and economic life of the town during the nineteenth century. Aberystwyth did not become a parish in its own right until 1861, having been until then part of the parish of Llanbadam Fawr. A small chapel on the north shore, close to the castle, was destroyed by the sea, and replaced in 1787 by the first church of Michael at the head of upper Great Darkgate Street. This church was short-lived, replaced in 1836 by a bigger one on a new site on the former town common. A fragment of this building survives behind the existing much larger church, which was built in 1890 on land given by the Powells of Nanteos in Laura Gardens. Meanwhile, the Powells had also provided land in 1866 for the Welsh church of Mary, the centre-piece of their housing development to the east of Bridge Street. Then, as Aberystwyth expanded in an easterly direction, a new parish church (Holy Trinity) was provided in 1887 at the foot of The Buarth, in advance of the housing development here.<sup>56</sup>

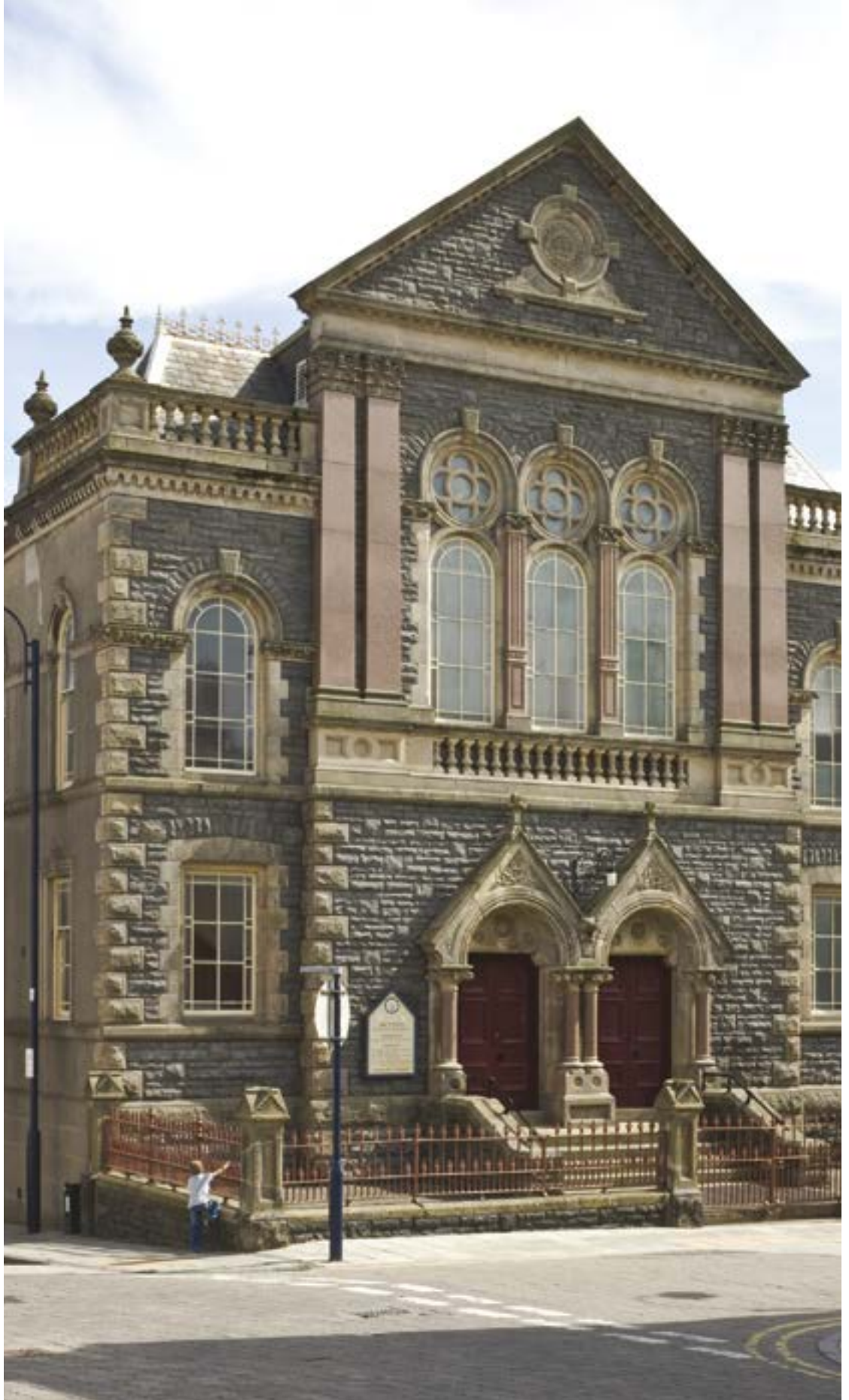
The earliest recorded Nonconformist chapels date from the late eighteenth century, when a Calvinistic Methodist chapel (Tabernacl) was first built on Nanteos land at the back of Mill Street,



*Seion Welsh Congregational Chapel, Baker Street (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

and a Baptist church was established in 1797. The latter was also the first building permitted outside the town walls — the precursor of Bethel Welsh Baptist Chapel on Baker Street. Other chapels on Queen Street (Wesleyan) and Bridge Street (Congregational) followed, but these early chapels were replaced (sometimes several times) during the course of the nineteenth century.<sup>57</sup> New chapels were also established in the second half of the nineteenth century, in part to ensure provision for the influx to the resort of a predominantly English population. Thus an English Baptist chapel was built on Alfred Place in 1869–70, an English Congregational church on Lower Portland Street in 1865–66, and an English Presbyterian church on Bath Street in 1871–72. All of these buildings make notable architectural statements, by virtue of their size as well as their chosen styles.

*Bethel Welsh Baptist Chapel, Baker Street  
(Crown Copyright:  
RCAHMW).*







*Greywacke exposed  
beneath the castle  
(Crown Copyright:  
RCAHMW).*

## Building Materials and Detail

### Walling

The hills and cliffs adjacent to the town provided an immediate source of building stone, quarried for the castle and perhaps also for early domestic buildings (there is no surviving evidence of a timber-building tradition in the area). Until the arrival of the railway, this local stone was ubiquitous in the town, and continued

to be used well into the twentieth century; many houses faced in brick used stone for the less conspicuous rear and side walls. There were several substantial quarries on Constitution Hill and around Penglais, as well as smaller (and possibly earlier) quarries on The Buarth. The local stone alternates thick and thin beds of a good hard building stone (greywacke), layered with a poorer quality shale suitable for use as infill. Builders could either exploit whatever was available, mixing stone from different beds, or could try and select only stone from the thicker beds. The latter provided regular blocks for coursed work, whereas the former resulted in a more irregular finish.

*Exposed stone enjoyed a brief fashion in the early nineteenth century (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*Far right: The use of exposed stone was embraced with particular boldness in The Queen's Hotel, where samples of local minerals were used in decorative panels (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

Various techniques were adopted for finishing the stonework. It is clear from contemporary descriptions that it was sometimes left exposed, presumably where better quality stone had been used: 'the stone used in building, being of the dark blue slate stone of the county, would give a sombre hue to the general appearance of the town, were not this in some degree obviated by pointing the interstices between each layer of the building with plaster, or else coating the whole of the exterior with stucco-work or cement. Favourable specimens of the former include the church and North Parade, while







*By the late nineteenth century, exposed stone was again used, often in combination with other materials and with a more pronounced dressing (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

on Marine Terrace the latter mode has been universally adopted'.<sup>58</sup> A later derivation of the pointing technique here described may have been the use of expressed pointing to achieve the appearance of ashlar blocks, but the fashion for render soon took a hold (supplanting limewash as well as exposed stonework), so that by 1864 'the practice is now becoming universal'.<sup>59</sup> Some examples of early nineteenth-century exposed stone have survived, but the more vernacular limewash is now very rare indeed, though the market building of 1824 is one example.

Nonetheless, by the late 1860s, fashion was again changing in favour of exposed stonework, its inherent dark colour now celebrated though not always appreciated. Responding to varied stone sizes, snecked masonry or jumper-work came to the fore, sometimes also exploiting colour variations to achieve a polychrome effect.

Dressing styles also varied, from the minimum needed to achieve a flat surface, to a rock-faced finish, or a tooled surface.

Aberystwyth is essentially a town of stone. However, its architectural character is dominated by the use of render, for which an increasingly elaborate and sophisticated vocabulary was developed during the nineteenth century. Initially, styles of render work were borrowed from a language of masonry: scribing defined blocks, which were a pale reflection of ashlar or, for a grander finish, the lower storey could be rusticated (as for example on Laura Place). Pilasters and angle-quoins were also ultimately derived from a masonry tradition, as were decorative finishes such as vermiculation. However, as the nineteenth century wore on, these elements were increasingly elaborated and treated more freely — quoins, pilasters,

*Right: Quoins and moulded architraves combined with smooth render above a shopfront, Eastgate (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*Far right: Stressed quoins and a rusticated lower storey with scribed render above, Saint Michael's Place (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

*A variety of unconventional render finishes above the shops on Owain Glyndŵr Square (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*Right: Render used to enhance a palazzo-style shop on Terrace Road (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*Far right: Crisp render detail on Queen's Road (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*







*Decorative render on North Parade (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

architraves and aprons were surfaces on which to apply decoration and Aberystwyth boasts some quirky, almost pictorial, examples, including some that incorporate other materials such as beach pebbles. There was scope for considerable variety even in conventional treatments — rustication could simulate chamfered masonry blocks, or merely

describe continuous courses or bands. It could be applied at first-floor level (especially where the ground floor was occupied by a continuous shopfront), or even, exceptionally, over the whole façade. There are also some eccentric examples where it alternates with vertical panels of smooth render.

*The use of colour to highlight architectural detail (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW),*



Render work lends itself to colour. Early renders may have been fairly uniform, and the present palette is probably relatively modern, but colour is now an important part of the character of the town. It can be used to highlight architectural detail on individual properties; it can also enhance or reinforce the unity of composition within individual units of development. Colour can be one of the variables within a row, although too much variation risks obscuring the coherence of the original design.

Render remained important throughout the nineteenth century, but its dominance was shaken from the 1860s partly by the new fashion (inspired by the gothic revival) for exposed materials, and partly by the ease with which different materials could be brought in by rail. Freestones for dressing came in from Grinshill, Cefn Mawr and Bath, and were widely used, for example, on The Queen's Hotel, The Old College and the developments on Queen Street. These imported materials were more likely to be used on ambitious building developments like these, as well as for chapels and major commercial buildings such as banks. The council also used imported stone from its own quarry at Ystrad Meurig for some of its developments, such as Trefechan Bridge and the housing on Greenfield Street.

In addition to a greater range of stone types, the railway also permitted the import of brick and terracotta, which were widely used especially in the period 1895–1905 for both domestic and commercial building. Higher-quality bricks were used as facings or for dressings on stone buildings. Red was the most common, but blue and yellow brick was also used for dressings and to achieve

a polychrome effect. Clay tiles were sometimes used as cladding.

By the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, all of these materials were part of the common stock, used in a bewildering variety of combinations. By this time, too, roughcast render was also making its appearance, usually combined with brickwork.

## Roofs

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Slate is by far and away the most common roofing material in Aberystwyth, with only rare instances of clay tile on some early twentieth-century buildings. Chimneys are a conspicuous feature of the townscape, and often give a clue as to the building period, with stone stacks more likely to indicate an early nineteenth-century date, brick being more characteristic of the later nineteenth-century phases of building. Chimney pots are also common survivals from this latter period, and there is a striking variety of types across the town. Chimneys are an important element in terraced rows, contributing to a strong vertical rhythm.

Eaves detail and dormer windows are other important components of the townscape. Deep eaves are a strong feature of most façades, often supported on ornamental brackets. Above them, dormer windows were either designed in terrace rows, or intentionally omitted. As an integral part of the design where they occur, different styles of dormer distinguish different rows, though the original unity this provided has sometimes been eroded by piecemeal alteration.





*The regular pattern of dormer windows is an important feature of this building on Marine Terrace (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*Chimneys are an important aspect of the roofscape (Crown Copyright: Cadw).*





*Above: Decorative detail on a dormer, Llanbadarn Road (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

*Right: Balanced dormers on a pair of houses on Queen's Road (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

*Far right: The rhythm of bay windows and dormers is an important element of the character of Custom House Street (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*







*Fine doorways on North Parade (left) and Eastgate (far left) (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*Left: Doorcases and doors on Portland Street (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

## Joinery

The high quality of much of the construction of Aberystwyth's building stock is easily matched by the quality of the detail. The urban Georgian style, which dominated building in the town centre for much of the nineteenth century, contributed some fine classical detailing — notably in doors and doorcases — and fine sash windows. From the end of the nineteenth century, with the greater variety of styles and materials came a parallel variety of detail. This is seen at its best in the suburbs, where there are many variations on the sash window theme, and some high-quality joinery.



*Above and below left:  
Original detail retained  
in suburban houses  
(Crown Copyright:  
RCAHMW).*

*Far right: An unusual  
porch on Llanbadarn  
Road (Crown Copyright:  
RCAHMW).*





# Character Areas



## I. The Old Town

### i. Great Darkgate Street with Eastgate and Queen Street, Bridge Street and Pier Street

#### Historical Background

Great Darkgate Street (including its continuation west of the clock tower) and the Bridge Street/ Pier Street axis were the two main streets of the medieval town, established in 1277 and laid out with plots or burgages at that time. At the foot of Great Darkgate Street and Bridge Street were the two main gates into the walled town, and there was a secondary gate at the foot of Eastgate. The walls themselves ran approximately on the line now taken by South Road, Baker Street, Chalybeate Street and Mill Street. To the north-west, the wall probably ran behind Crynfryn Buildings and around the old Castle Hotel. Queen Street formed a back lane, completing the grid within the walls.



*Above: Aberystwyth from the north-east, 1835 (The National Library of Wales).*

*Left: Bridge Street was one of the principal streets of the medieval town (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

There was a market area at the intersection of these main streets, distinctive because of its absence of burgage plots (the area bounded by upper Great Darkgate Street, Princess Street and Bridge Street); with a secondary street or back lane on the south side of Great Darkgate Street (the later Queen Street, perhaps with its continuation, Princess Street).

Parts of Pier Street were probably never built up before the nineteenth century, and there was open land to either side of it, and behind the properties on either side of Bridge Street, which was not developed before the late eighteenth century. This land was partly taken up for housing and was also able to accommodate such a large-scale building as The Castle Hotel (subsequently The Old College). The principal streets were laid out with burgages when the town was established, which have in some areas proved remarkably enduring, though damaged by the scale of development behind the frontages on the south side of Great Darkgate Street. This plot structure is an important component of the medieval town.

As the town expanded to the east and north, so did the orientation of the town move away from Bridge Street, which with the streets to either side of it, retained more of a residential character, whilst Pier Street and especially Great Darkgate Street became the focus for commercial development.

### Archaeological Potential

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Traces of the presumed town wall were discovered during pipeline works in 1974, running beneath 3 Great Darkgate Street, and thence running north-west towards the site of the east gate. Much of the conjectured line of the wall runs beneath roads and through rear property boundaries, which may mean relatively good survival below ground. The wall was probably fronted by a wide ditch, which is potentially a good source of medieval midden material and waterlogged deposits. Baker Street in particular may have developed along the line of this ditch, which was probably more comprehensively built over elsewhere. The sites of the town gates also have the potential to yield substantial structural remains, though they may have been robbed out or truncated by later development.

The activities that took place within the medieval town and the locations of many of the main

buildings are still only poorly understood, and little archaeological work has been undertaken here. The houses of most sections of society, commercial premises, industrial sites, and many municipal buildings would have been on the burgages. This intensity of land use over a long period of time has the potential for a complex sequence of archaeological remains. Existing information suggests that any remains are likely to be isolated survivals and difficult to interpret. Rear yard areas may yield better preserved evidence of former land use.

### The Character of the Building

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As this is the heart of the medieval town, development patterns in the area are typically dense, with a highly varied building stock.

Most of the buildings on the principal streets are nineteenth century, with only a handful that may have earlier origins. There are pockets of twentieth-century redevelopment, especially on Great Darkgate Street. Nonetheless, the pattern of development on the frontages still reflects the original pattern of landholding established at the end of the thirteenth century. Characteristically, each plot had an independent history, eventually resulting in the diverse mix of building age and type that survives today. A cycle of building and rebuilding has only rarely resulted in the amalgamation of plots. Thus although individual buildings may be of no great age, they provide a vital clue to the previous history of landholding in this area, reaching right back to the earliest days of the town.

The mix of buildings in the town centre illustrates key aspects of Aberystwyth's development after the eighteenth century. The buildings occupied by Clinton's Cards and Santander on Great Darkgate Street, and The Lion and The Nag's Head on Bridge Street, are two-storeyed, with steep-pitched roofs suggesting an eighteenth-century date. They may therefore be amongst the earliest buildings in the town. Large town houses dominate Bridge Street, and on all the principal streets, commercial buildings trace a sequence of development from the very early nineteenth century. The boost to the fortunes of the town after the arrival of the railway is reflected in a late nineteenth-century building boom, seen for example on Chalybeate Street, where several early nineteenth-century vernacular buildings





*A mix of buildings of different ages, scales and styles gives a clue to the history of Great Darkgate Street (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*Pier Street retains many features from the nineteenth-century development of Aberystwyth as a resort (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*Bridge Street was an important medieval street and was a prestigious residential address in the early nineteenth century (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

were replaced with much taller commercial properties. Eastgate was also a thoroughfare within the original structure of the town, and was part of its commercial development in the nineteenth century. Most, but by no means all, of the buildings here are of a more modest scale. By contrast, Queen Street started life as a back lane providing access to the rear of the burgages on Great Darkgate Street. It had been almost completely built up by 1834, probably

at first with relatively lowly cottages, then, as there was greater pressure for the town to develop in the mid-late nineteenth century, with taller residential properties. These are very characteristic of the town, with their smooth-rendered walls, sash windows, and canted bays. The long development history and varied building uses give the old town centre a lively architectural character, expressed in buildings of different scale, materials and finish.





*Aberystwyth Castle is the most tangible reminder of the town's medieval origins (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*The Old College is one of the most remarkable buildings in the old town (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

## ii. Laura Place and the Castle

### Historical Background

The castle was established as an integral part of the town in 1277. It was briefly the site of a royal mint in the seventeenth century before it was partially demolished in 1649 during the Civil War. Its ruins were later integrated into the development of the town as a resort, and the grounds were laid out with gardens and paths in the early years of the nineteenth century. Laura Place was part of the open ground contained within the town walls, but remained undeveloped until the late eighteenth century.

The first development here was Castle House on land leased out in 1788. The land behind it belonged to the Powells of Nanteos, who were instrumental in the establishment of The Assembly Rooms in 1820, and in the layout of the two rows of houses shortly afterwards (the houses may even have been designed by W. E. Powell). There were gardens in the square created between the houses, The Assembly Rooms and Castle House. These survived until the land was given for the third St Michael's Church in 1890. The Powells were also responsible for the layout of New Street in the late 1820s. Castle House was absorbed into the ambitious Castle Hotel project in 1864, which in turn became the nucleus for the college in 1872.



*Contrasting styles:  
Old College and the  
houses of Laura Place  
(Crown Copyright:  
RCAHMW).*

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## Archaeological Potential

Relatively little of the original structure of the castle survives above ground, but the site has been excavated several times since at least the nineteenth century, revealing information about its layout. A Roman coin and a Bronze Age axe were also discovered within it, but there is no evidence for any specific prehistoric site within the area. There is potential for the area to yield more information relating to its long history, even including its nineteenth-century incarnation as a tourist attraction — the first edition Ordnance Survey map shows cannons, an observatory and a camera obscura within its grounds.

The area around Laura Place was relatively undeveloped until the nineteenth century, but little is known about land use here in the

medieval period, and there is the potential for archaeological information to be derived from this area.

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## The Character of Building

As a high-status planned development on previously open ground, this area has a spacious open character, which contrasts with the denser development in the old town core.

The housing in Laura Place is a striking and unusual example of sophisticated urban Georgian building, carefully articulated with rusticated render ground floors and scribed render above. It forms a harmonious group with the former Assembly Rooms and the houses beyond it. The Old College is a gothic tour-de-force, built with Cefn stone and Bath stone dressings.





iii. Powell Street, Greys Inn Road,  
William Street and George Street

**Historical Building**

This little enclave of streets was developed in the 1860s on open ground, which then belonged to the Powells of Nanteos. The centrepiece of the development was the St Mary’s Church, built in 1866.

**Archaeological Potential**

The area was probably undeveloped until the nineteenth century, and although there is some possibility that archaeological features and deposits associated with the defence of the medieval town could be preserved around the edges of the area,

nineteenth-century developments have probably obscured much of this.

**The Character of Building**

The planned residential development was predominantly artisans’ housing built over a limited period. It is relatively tightly developed and has a coherent architectural character. Some of the houses are early examples of the revival of the use of exposed stone in building, but most are rendered, with a range of finishes, including some good examples of decorative detailing and rusticated lower storeys.

*William Street — housing built for artisans on land belonging to the Nanteos estate (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

*One of the earliest buildings on High Street, as recorded in 1900 (Ceredigion Museum, Aberystwyth).*



#### iv. High Street, Custom House Street and South Road Area

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##### Historical Background

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High Street was one of the first streets to be laid out as part of the expansion of the town onto its former commons at the end of the eighteenth century, though there may have been some earlier building on its east side, in the rear of the gardens on Bridge Street. The land belonged to the town council, who granted the first building lease here in 1792. Other streets soon followed, though there are few buildings surviving from the first phases of development — most seem to date from the late nineteenth century, perhaps rebuilt to a higher specification when the original leases fell in. Early photographs record a more vernacular character to the houses; later nineteenth-century redevelopment introduced a greater formality and uniformity. South Road probably had a more industrial character originally — there was a foundry here in the early nineteenth century, and ship-building yards and saw pits just below the street line. A planned development of workers' housing, including three short rows of back-to-back houses, was demolished in the twentieth century.

##### Archaeological Potential

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The line of the town defences ran through this area, probably along the line of South Road, where the remains of the wall were discovered at the junction with Sea View Place in the early 1950s. Below this was the probable location of a medieval harbour, and there is the potential for remains associated with this early harbour, and activities related to it, to survive here.

##### The Character of Building

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The area represents a planned extension of urban building on previously open ground within the old town limits. Development and some redevelopment mostly took place between the late eighteenth and early twentieth centuries, in a series of blocks on regularly laid-out streets. With some important exceptions, where vernacular proportions (though not detail) have been retained, this enclave is dominated by uniform terraces of two and three-storey housing from about 1860–90. The houses open directly off the streets, and often have oriel bay windows, sometimes springing from just off pavement level. Render is the dominant material, with a considerable variety of detail, including pilasters, rusticated lower storeys, string courses, etc. Later nineteenth-century terraces are more often of exposed stonework combined with yellow brick dressings.





*The two sides of High Street were developed and redeveloped at different periods, giving them quite a different character (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*The ornate façade of The Castle Hotel contrasts with the uniform rhythm of terraced houses on Custom House Street (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

*Marine Terrace was the jewel in Aberystwyth's crown: developed over several decades and by many hands, it nevertheless achieved a harmonious appearance through the use of shared conventions of building (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



## 2. Marine Terrace and The Promenade

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### Historical Background

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The land on which The Promenade was developed belonged to the town council, and appears to have been carefully planned, with plots systematically set out and leased in blocks, some of which were then sub-let. The first houses on The Promenade were close to Castle House, where five houses had been built by 1806. The two houses next to the Old College (Mount Pleasant) may be the survivors of this development. By 1820, development already stretched beyond the present Terrace Road and, by 1848, there were 55 houses stretching in a

continuous crescent almost as far as what is now Albert Place. A lull in building came to an end with construction of The Queen's Hotel in 1864–66, and although plans for the comprehensive development of the remainder of the terrace did not quite proceed according to plan, the whole sweep of the bay was completed by the building of Alexandra Hall in 1896.

The Promenade itself was built in several phases. The first stretched from close to the end of Pier Street to Bryn Diodde with its bath house, and was complete by 1820, though widened in 1860. A second phase in 1865–66 completed this length as far as the foot of Constitution Hill, and a third phase between 1901 and 1904 extended The Promenade beneath the castle as far as South Road. The final section connecting to the harbour was not built until 1930–31.



*The pier first opened in 1865 (The National Library).*



## Archaeological Potential

Before the area was developed in the nineteenth century, the beach front may have been the site of various marine activities and there is the potential for significant palaeo-environmental deposits to survive along the coastline. It is, however, unlikely that there would be significant evidence from the landward side — a medieval chapel is recorded but was lost to the sea in the eighteenth century.

## The Character of Building

Marine Terrace was assembled gradually during the nineteenth century in a carefully controlled process that has lent it considerable overall visual coherence. The Promenade itself has also had a long history of building, rebuilding and repair, but has come to form an important broad margin between buildings and the sea, with a robust character of its own. The pier has had a chequered history of building, rebuilding and alteration including reduction in its length, and The Bath House was demolished in 1892. There are few other structures associated with leisure on The Promenade, the most notable exception being the shelter at Bath Rock, which was built in the 1920s. The strong character of the sea walls with their cast-iron railings, and some of the street furniture

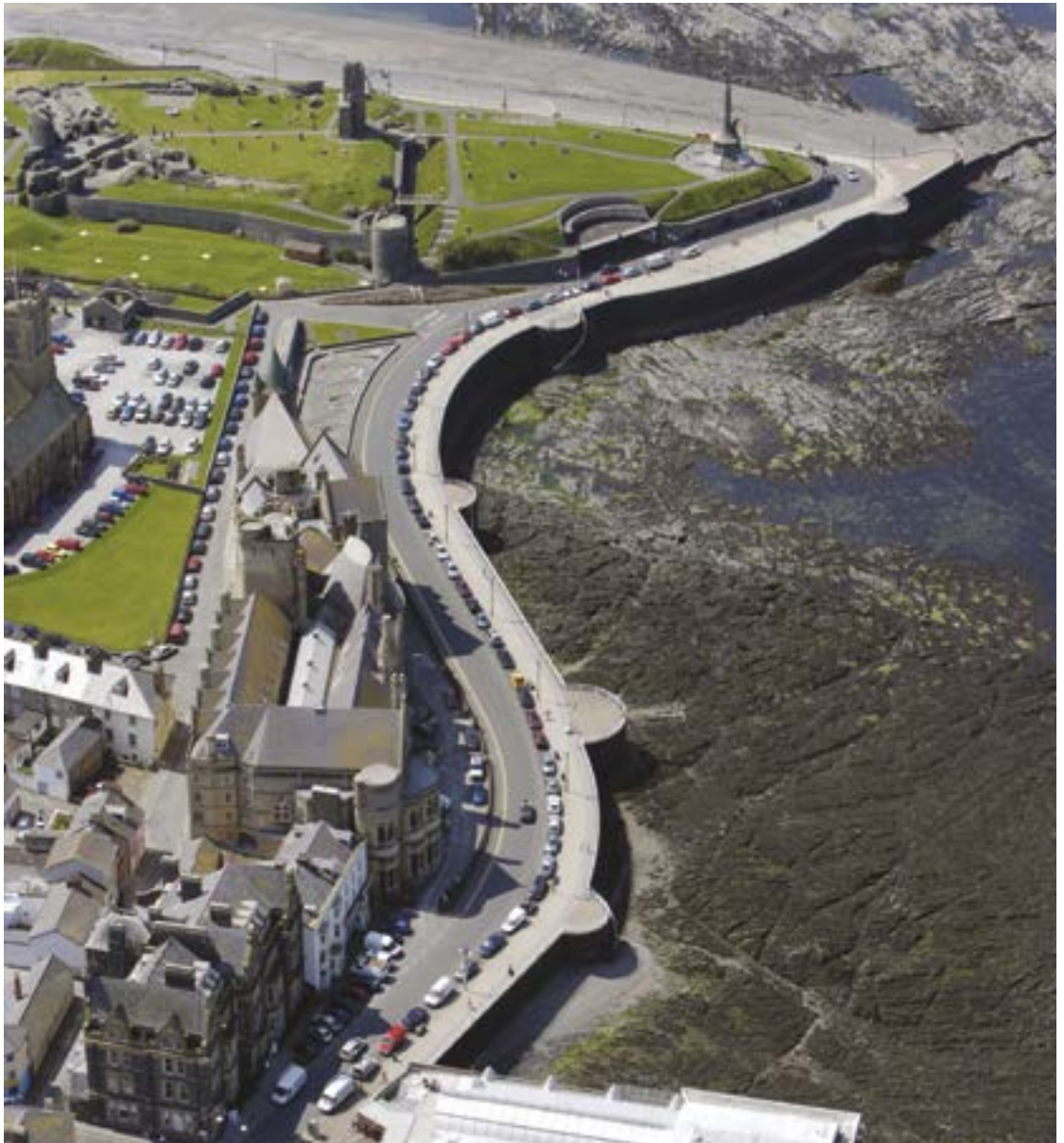
(notably the snake-work benches) are distinctive components of the shoreline.

Typically, Marine Terrace was built up in a series of individual developments conforming to a common model of building, which established storey heights and conventions of style. Early images and a series of photographs from the 1860s show a strong unity of design round the sweep of the bay, dominated by ranks of curved bay windows, small-paned sash windows and classical doorcases in buildings that were all rendered. The only real exception to this uniformity was Bonsalls Terrace, built as a two-storeyed row, but rebuilt about 1870 as a much taller block. This stylistic harmony was eroded by the different styles introduced for the extension of the terrace from the late 1860s, which favoured exposed stone, and by alterations to individual rows. These alterations, however, tended to be applied across the whole of a block, rather than to individual components of it. It is only more recent change that has seen the harmony eroded still further with the introduction of different window styles in different elements of the same block. The King's Hall site interrupts the rhythm of the terrace in the scale, form and detail of the redevelopment; originally, there was a continuous building line here, with no open space.

*The shelter, built in about 1925, is one of the only traditional seafront structures on The Promenade (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*The sinuous lines of The Promenade continue towards Castle Point (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*





### 3. Owain Glyndŵr Square, North Parade, Portland Street, Alexandra Road, and Terrace Road

#### Historical Background

*'We the jury direct that part of the waste land called Morfa Swnd be mapped and divided into convenient plots for buildings.'*<sup>60</sup>

This area comprised part of the common land of the town. The corporation had been forced to defend their rights to the commons in the face of challenge from the Powells of Nanteos and the Pryses of Gogerddan. They won their case, but it was a costly victory, and systematic leasing for development was a response to financial necessity. There was also mounting pressure to enable the town to expand outside its walls.

The first reference to houses built below Great Darkgate Street is from 1798,<sup>61</sup> but by 1809 North Parade and the adjacent grid of streets had been laid out — development proceeded apace and there were only a few gaps on North Parade by 1834.

The council appears to have reviewed its leases from the 1860s, and most of the properties in this area were either rebuilt completely or substantially remodelled in this period. Development along Alexandra Road probably didn't get under way until after the arrival of the railway; together with Terrace Road, this was where redevelopment in the early twentieth century was most extensive.

#### Archaeological Potential

The area remained undeveloped until the end of the eighteenth century, though there is the potential for archaeological information relating to the medieval period to be present along Portland Street and North Parade, which lay directly outside two town gates. There is also limited potential for archaeological information relating to nineteenth-century industrial developments, including an iron foundry and a slate-works, recorded on late nineteenth-century maps.

#### The Character of Building

The planned layout of streets in this area originally had a clear hierarchy, with North Parade laid out as a broad formal avenue, Portland Street as a secondary principal street, and the others as minor lanes. These distinctions were blurred in redevelopment during the nineteenth century, but there are still differences in the scale and status of building.

The earliest surviving buildings on North Parade were built in exposed local stone, laid in regularly coursed blocks. This style of building was quickly supplanted by the use of render as a finishing material, and the whole area contains excellent examples that trace development in its use throughout the nineteenth century. By the end of that century other materials were coming to the fore, especially for major commercial building projects: banks favoured imported stone, whereas other commercial developments introduced bright terracotta or combined brick and stone. With this greater range of materials came a greater range of styles for commercial building (the residential streets tended to conform more closely to a Georgian model). It is notable, however, that for the most part, these new styles were introduced with more than an eye to the overall townscape — Terrace Road includes a remarkable variety of individual building styles, balanced by similarities in scale and storey heights, and with architectural detail providing a set of variations on common themes.

*Some of the first houses to be built on North Parade, a new street laid out at the end of the eighteenth century. With their exposed stone walls and fine joinery detail, they are good examples of the Georgian style that was typical of Aberystwyth's renaissance as a seaside resort (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*Some of the last houses to be built on North Parade, at the end of the nineteenth century. They make a proud display of the craft of architectural render work (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*







## 4. The Harbour

*'Nothing in Aberystwyth so powerfully exhibits the march of its improvements than the works at the New harbour.'*<sup>62</sup>

### Historical Background

Like all the castle towns established by Edward I, Aberystwyth was sited to take advantage of the sea. The early town had a harbour, built between 1280 and 1295. A wing-wall to protect it ran from the ridge of rock adjacent to the south tower of the castle, south-eastwards on a line now occupied by Marine Terrace. A painting by Gastineau of about 1830 probably shows this wall, including a small tower part way along its length. There is a reference in the account for 1287–89 to a 'new wall on the sea front, with a new tower, outside the outer bailey, and in 1955, footings of a wall were revealed in a trench in the roadway to the north of South Marine Terrace'.<sup>63</sup>

The harbour flourished during the fourteenth century, but by the early sixteenth century, the formation of a sandbar across its mouth was having a harmful effect on trade. During the eighteenth century, proposals to improve the harbour were drawn up by Lewis Morris, and the

establishment of a harbour trust in 1760 may have been followed by renewed investment in harbour facilities. But John Wood's map of 1834 shows only the slightest of possible wharves in the area behind what is now South Road, where a small shipbuilding ground corresponds with the modern harbour inlet.

A Harbour Act of 1780 made provision for the repair and enlargement of the harbour, but works did not begin until 1836, when a stone pier on the south side was built to protect the harbour entrance, and the beach raised with groins to guide and form its slope. A new road was also cut through rock, and a bridge made across the mouth of the river Ystwyth. There was also an embankment carrying a tram road from the bridge to Alltwen on the south side of the bay, where the stone for the harbour was quarried. Further works were undertaken in 1858, when the pier was extended and a wharf and quay built with warehouses along it;<sup>64</sup> and again, sometime after 1873, when the harbour was taken over by the town council. Stone from Ystrad Meurig was brought in via the Manchester and Milford Railway, which was linked to the harbour via a bridge over the Ystwyth.<sup>65</sup>

The area was resolutely industrial until the end of the nineteenth century when a saw mill and timber yard were replaced by the housing development of South Marine Terrace.

*Aberystwyth harbour from the air (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

*The late nineteenth-century bridge at Trefechan and a former corn-store — a rare survivor of a harbour-side warehouse (Crown Copyright: RCAHMMW).*



*A mix of modern development overlooking the harbour (Crown Copyright: RCAHMMW).*



### Archaeological Potential

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Excavations in about 1922 recovered one of the largest collections of Mesolithic flints in Ceredigion along with some later artefacts. There is clear potential for other prehistoric deposits and sites to survive in this area, including submerged or waterlogged deposits that could yield valuable paleo-environmental information. The layout of the medieval harbour remains largely unknown, and there is some scope for the survival of archaeological features and deposits associated with it. The extent of later construction and industrial activity close by, together with dredging to accommodate larger

vessels, however, will have limited the potential for significant survival.

### The Character of Building

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Most of the harbour structures of today are relatively modern, but it is probable that elements of their predecessors survive, incorporated in the modern walls. The warehouse adjacent to the bridge (now Rummors Wine Bar) is probably early nineteenth century, and is shown on John Wood's map of 1834. South Marine Terrace is a typical seaside development of boarding houses — tall with many bay windows — but retains few elements of original character.



## 5. Trefechan

### Historical Background

Trefechan appears to have grown up as a small industrial bridgehead suburb, following no particular plan. It is shown on late eighteenth-century maps and images, and little is known of it before then, though the bridgehead could well have been a focus for development from the medieval period onwards.

It has also been suggested that there may have been a native Welsh settlement here predating the establishment of the town, though there is no archaeological evidence to support this. The Manchester and Milford Railway enclosed it to the south by 1867, when, in addition to the limekilns already recorded in 1834, there was a brewery and several sawmills, as well as a scatter of small terraced housing.

An early stone bridge was washed away in 1796, replaced by a temporary timber bridge and then a stone bridge in 1798 (both designed by John Nash). This in turn was destroyed by another devastating flood in 1886, and the present bridge was completed in 1890.

### Archaeological Potential

Within this area are the slopes leading up to Pendinas, and the variety of finds recovered from within the large Iron Age enclosure on its summit indicates a site of considerable importance in the prehistoric period. The area around the base of the hill should not be overlooked as offering great potential for further prehistoric archaeology.

The area could also hold evidence of medieval settlement and other features, including earlier bridges. Later industrial activity in the area is likely to have had a significant impact on any earlier remains, however, and archaeology could therefore be severely truncated and difficult to interpret.

There is perhaps greater potential for the survival of evidence relating to the industrial life and development of the town during the nineteenth century.



*The former maltings is an important reminder of Trefechan's industrial past (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



### The Character of Building

Until the early twentieth century, Trefechan had a predominantly vernacular and working character, with many small cottages, some of which are recorded in old photographs. The two fine Georgian town houses (The Lawn and The Green) stood out amongst clusters and rows of cottages. By this time, the area was notorious for the poor quality of its housing, and much of it was replaced in early and enlightened developments by the town council, typically with small terraced housing in brick, or brick and roughcast. Notable early survivals are The Fountain Inn, and the malthouse, with its bottle-kiln behind. Several limekilns are also testimony to the industrial history of the area.



*Early housing developments at Trefechan (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

## 6. Queen's Road and North Road Area

### Historical Background

The line of Queen's Road was set out by 1809 (it appears on William Couling's map) but remained largely undeveloped in 1834 (with the exception of Sandmarsh Cottage). Behind it, by this time, a rope walk had been established and this survived the development of the street, beginning with the town hall in 1856, and continuing into the late nineteenth century with residential development. The beginnings of North Road are shown on the Ordnance Survey map of 1889. It had formed part of Seddon's ambitious scheme for the seafront area in 1866, and the infirmary was located there from 1885. However, along with the streets behind it, North Road was not finally laid out until the 1890s.

Development along it and the adjacent roads is almost all of the 1890s and 1900s, and thus has a coherent character. Above the residential developments are the extensive quarries that provided much of the building stone used in the town.

### Archaeological Potential

There may have been prehistoric activity in this area and there is some potential for archaeological survival. Any evidence for medieval quarrying here is likely to have been destroyed by later activity.

Queen's Road marks a division between town centre and suburb. On its south-western side, housing opens directly off the pavement and is similar in style to the developments on adjacent streets, whereas the north-eastern side of the street adopts a more spacious layout, including small front gardens. Housing is still essentially urban in character, in tall terraced rows, including a notable example of gothic revival. Suburban spaciousness is taken further on North Road, where units of development are characteristically pairs or even single houses, set in larger gardens and overlooking open recreation grounds. Development on adjoining streets took the form of terraced rows.

Considerable variety in building materials was available by the time this area was developed, matched by a variety in the styles deemed appropriate for an essentially suburban setting. Survival of original detail, including windows, architectural ironwork and boundaries, contributes to the strong character of the area.



## 7. Park Avenue Area

*Left (top to bottom):  
High-quality suburban  
housing in the  
Queen's Road and  
North Road area (Crown  
Copyright: RCAHMW).*



Until relatively recently, the only approach to Aberystwyth from the south was via Trefechan Bridge. Land on the north-east bank of the river Rheidol was originally common grazing land belonging to the corporation (Morfa Mawr), which had been enclosed as a series of regular fields by the early nineteenth century. Only the area closest to the old town at Mill Street had been developed, first with a tannery, then with the town gas works in 1838. The arrival of the railways in 1864 and 1867, however, opened the whole area up to a variety of activities best suited to an out-of-town location with rail access.



The first of these was probably the cattle market, which was already being considered by 1865, and which had opened by 1874. It was associated with a slaughter house and candle works, and a tannery. Nearby, the Rheidol Iron Foundry was closely associated with the Manchester and Milford Railway and may even have been built for it.



Ever enterprising, the corporation proceeded to lay out a new street (Park Avenue — first called Smithfield Road). Lined with trees, it began to be set out for housing development in the 1880s, but very little had been built by 1889, and most of the residential development dates from the 1890s or early 1900s. The remaining fields between the road and the river were also developed in this period, including Aberystwyth's earliest council housing on Greenfield Street, built in 1899. The Drill Hall was built on Glyndŵr Street in 1904.



Park Avenue was continued as the Boulevard Saint Briec and Rhodfa Padarn. The former cattle market site was developed for retail in the early 2000s.

### Archaeological Potential

The north-western edge of this area is defined by the supposed line of the medieval town wall, and the wall and its ditch may be preserved beneath Mill Street or the buildings that line it. The area probably also contains the site of the medieval town's mill, serviced by a leat running along Plas Crug Avenue. Other industries using water may



*Suburban development on The Buarth around Holy Trinity Church (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

have developed here even before the nineteenth century, when there was a concentration of industry including a tannery, gasworks and electric light works. There is some potential for the recovery of information relating to the medieval town defences and industrial activities, though the extent of survival is unpredictable. There may also be evidence for the gasworks and tannery beneath the Mill Street car park site.

### The Character of Building

There are remnants of former industrial activities that once characterized this area, including the gas office and show rooms of 1901, the candle works and a wall of the Rheidol iron foundry, which forms the boundary of the football field. Housing along Park Avenue is a series of terraces of two and three storeys. These are variously rendered (including some good examples with banded rustication to the ground floor), or in brick with roughcast. Like other Aberystwyth housing, bay and dormer windows are a prominent feature, and there is also good boundary detail including cast-iron railings.

## 8. The Buarth and Plas Crug

### Historical Background

The Buarth was a rocky outcrop nearly perfect as a source of building material for the town. Development here followed the establishment of Holy Trinity Church, which was begun in 1883, and housing followed from the late 1890s when the lease was acquired by a private developer — T. E. Salmon.

Plas Crug was a farmhouse of possibly ancient origin, traditionally linked with the Welsh princes, and sometimes thought to be the site of the castle of Aber-rheidol. However, excavations carried out at Plas Crug Primary School in 2009 revealed no evidence of medieval activity. A tower attached to the house was more likely to have been an eighteenth-century folly than a medieval fortification. The house belonged to the Nanteos estate until it was sold to the corporation in 1873. By this time, Plas Crug Avenue was well established as a popular walk, improved with tree planting and the provision of benches by





the corporation. It followed the line of a mill leat, which had been reduced to a small ditch by 1889. The corporation sold the site to the county education authority in 1964 and the old house was demolished, its site now occupied by Plas Crug primary school.

### Archaeological Potential

As a rocky outcrop of high ground, The Buarth may have attracted prehistoric activity. However, medieval and later quarrying, together with late nineteenth and early twentieth-century urban development, will have removed any evidence of earlier occupation and land use.

### The Character of Building

Housing on The Buarth encompasses a range of types and sizes, but is mostly in terraces or in rows of balanced pairs. Smaller houses typically present flat frontages, but larger houses predominate and have strongly modelled façades, with bay windows, gables and other detailing

providing a strong rhythm. The area has a remarkable coherence; this is reinforced by the way in which a variety of materials — brick in a variety of colours, stone, roughcast — is carefully controlled within matching groups. Unity is further strengthened by the high rate of survival of original detail, including windows and doors, and strong boundary detail.

*Left and below left: Terraced housing on The Buarth celebrates some of the best in suburban architecture and building (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

## 9. Llanbadarn Road Area

### Historical Background

The junction of Llanbadarn Road and Penglais Hill was the site of the north gate. Toll gates were set up following Cardiganshire's Turnpike Act of 1770, but although the road to Machynlleth was a turnpike from the outset, the road from Aberystwyth via Llanbadarn and Ponterwyd was not included until 1812. The gate was moved to the junction of the two roads from an earlier site further west, perhaps when this new turnpike was established. There was limited development leading up to the toll gate in the early nineteenth century, consolidated by extensive rebuilding in near continuous terraces along the main road towards the end of the century. A satellite settlement of small cottages to the south of the road was in existence by 1834. Here there was a tannery, commemorated in the names Skinner Street and The Skinners Arms. The Coopers public house is named after the coopers' workshops that were behind it.

Development along the street beyond the toll gate probably began in the 1860s, but expansion here did not get seriously under way until the end of the 1880s, following the setting out of Saint David's Road and Caradoc Road on former fields. By 1889, the first few villas had been built on Saint David's Road, and a single house on Caradoc Road. By this time, Llanbadarn Fawr was also acquiring something of a suburban status, and linear development was creeping westward from the church in a series of housing developments, which included substantial villas.

Development on the south side of the road was limited partly by the abrupt slopes of The Buarth (tucked under which Llanbadarn vicarage was built in the 1820s and rebuilt in the 1860s) and partly by the cemetery, established here in 1883.

*Top: Terraced housing on Llanbadarn Road — a distinctive display of decorative brickwork (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*Right and below: Llanbadarn Road — large suburban houses in spacious gardens (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



## The Character of Building

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West of the junction of Penglais Hill and Llanbadarn Road, continuous terraces are late nineteenth century in character, variously built in stone with brick dressings, or finished with ornately decorated render. The smaller streets behind were once occupied by small vernacular cottages, but all were replaced by early twentieth-century council housing in the brick and roughcast style, which is characteristic of early developments by the town council. On Llanbadarn Road close to the site of the north gate, the earlier phase of development is characterized by short and varied terraced rows, in stone and brick.

Further out, large suburban villas and semi-detached pairs set in mature gardens predominate, with an eclectic range of materials, detail and styles. Red brick and roughcast with half-timbered decoration or terracotta detail rubs shoulders with traditional stonework with brick dressings, the choice of materials related to the choice of style, whether arts and crafts, gothic or Italianate. Boundaries are almost as varied as the styles of house themselves, ranging from rustic stonework to neater coursed stone, brickwork and cast iron.

## Archaeological Potential

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There is no suggestion of activity in this area before the post-medieval period, though the route linking the two medieval settlements of Aberystwyth and Llanbadarn Fawr is likely to itself have medieval origins.





*Top and far left: Caradoc Road and Iorwerth Avenue — variations on the semi-detached house (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*Left: Saint David's Road — large-scale terraced housing (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

## 10. Penglais

### Historical Background

The 1889 Ordnance Survey map shows Penglais as fields and woodland, interrupted by small-scale quarrying, and with the beginnings of development adhering to the south side of the road line. Here, the Aberystwyth Union Workhouse had been built in 1840, where Bronglais Hospital was built in 1966. Here too was the militia barracks of 1867, converted into council housing in 1912, and demolished in 1979. Gogerddan Cottages were built as artisan houses close to the north gate but, beyond them, development underway in the 1880s took the form of larger paired houses in small gardens.

On the north side of the road, the land formed part of the Penglais estate of the Richardes family and was only gradually released for development, beginning in the inter-war period along the road line and in the fields immediately behind it (Elysian Grove and Cae Melyn). In the 1940s, the town council proposed compulsorily purchasing

land to build council houses opposite the entrance to The National Library, but the college, opposed to this scheme, stepped in and bought the land, offering nine hectares (23 acres) as a public park on condition that no houses should be built. Plas Penglais mansion, which was the original centrepiece of this estate, was built in 1770, remodelled in the 1830s, and rebuilt as the Vice Chancellor's residence in 1951 by Sir Percy Thomas.

There was limited speculative development in the 1960s at Dan y Coed, but much of the area is now wooded.

### Archaeological Potential

A Roman coin found in this area suggests some activity in this period, but the character of any activity here before the post-medieval period has yet to be closely defined. Nineteenth-century buildings at the edge of town, including the barracks and workhouse, have been demolished, leaving only potential archaeology as physical evidence of the buildings.

## The Character of Building

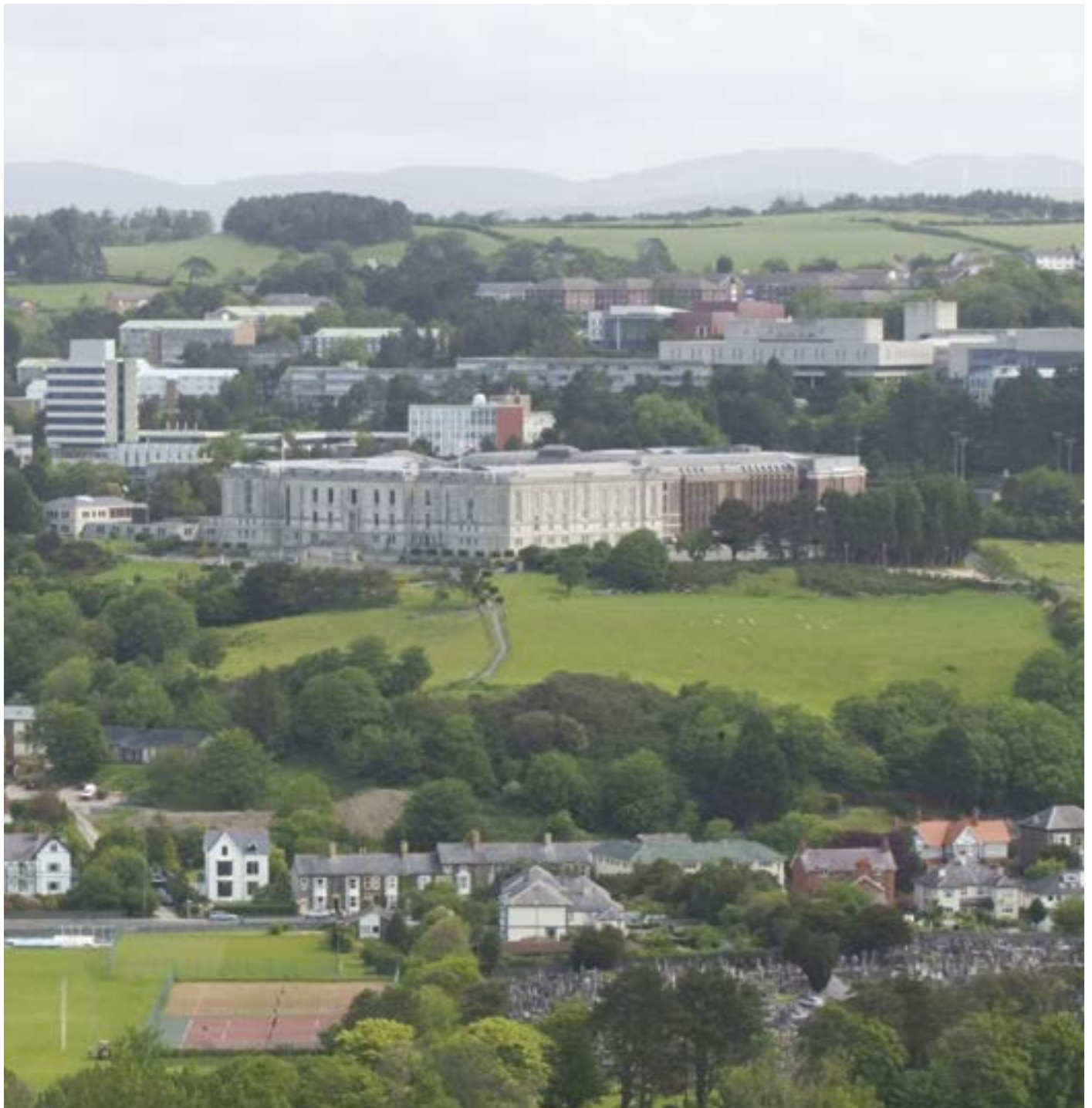
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The two sides of Penglais Hill have very different characters, reflecting the different periods and circumstances of their development. The south side was developed earlier, and included the long stone terrace of Gogerddan Cottages, a uniform development distinguished by the shouldered arches of its openings in a small touch of gothic. Beyond the redeveloped barracks site, larger houses were built in a series of repeated pairs,

with some individual villas beyond. Exposed stone predominates, often with simple gothic detailing.

On the north side of the road, development did not begin until the 1930s, but was well-planned as a series of streets of speculative building, mostly as semi-detached pairs. With some exceptions, a white render was the favoured finish; with their advanced gables and hipped roofs the houses are a type common in many suburban developments of this period.

*The National Library of Wales, with the university campus beyond (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*





## 11. The National Library and the University Campus

### Historical Background

The idea of a university for Wales was first mooted in the 1840s, and a committee to promote the idea was established in 1854. It had no government support, but relied on voluntary contributions at first, sufficient to enable purchase of the former Castle Hotel in 1867, a move which began 'one of the most remarkable chapters in the history of education in Wales'.<sup>66</sup> Aberystwyth College opened in 1872 with 26 students, continued to expand, and admitted women in 1884. Despite its early success, state help was slow in coming, and Aberystwyth only received funding on an equal footing with the other Welsh colleges (whose establishment post-dated it) from 1885. Thereafter, the college continued to thrive, becoming 'the cradle of the cultural and national revival of late nineteenth-century Wales'.<sup>67</sup> Success required expansion, first of the original buildings, and then onto new sites. The first of these was on The Buarth, where laboratories were built in 1907, and then on Penglais, where 35 hectares (87 acres) were purchased for the college in 1929. Following the appointment of Percy Thomas as architectural advisor in 1935, a master plan for the site was established, but little was built — only the agricultural research block, the halls of residence and the swimming pool. A second plan for the site was prepared in 1957, but there was only intermittent building until a new scheme (by Dale Owen of the Percy Thomas Partnership) was adopted in 1964–66. Although revised in 1974, it provided the framework for much of the development of the present campus.

Meanwhile, a movement in support of a national library for Wales began in earnest in 1873 — Aberystwyth, as the home of the first university college, seemed the natural home for such an institution. By 1904, there was government support for this, land was acquired, and a charter of incorporation granted in 1907. Following a competition for the design of the new building, the foundation stone was laid in 1911, and work continued in phases between 1911–16, and 1935–37, by which time the main ranges were substantially complete. Extensions and infill developments have followed as the library has continued to expand.

### Archaeological Potential

A suggestion of prehistoric activity here is derived from a crop mark recorded on early aerial photographs, but the extent to which any other features may have survived subsequent development is unknown.

### The Character of Building

The National Library exploits its high-level site to magnificent effect; its white stone neo-classicism rising squarely above the town on a podium of green open space. Behind it, the university campus presents a more eclectic mix of building styles reflecting its long (and continuing) development.

The buildings of the first phase are mostly Neo-Georgian and stone-faced, but a modernist aesthetic has dominated since the 1960s, introducing an often austere geometry using concrete and glass alongside more traditional materials. Many of these buildings showcase individual styles, matched to their function, whilst being an integral part of a designed landscape.

# Statement of Significance

Aberystwyth's urban character rests on the role of seaside town it secured during the nineteenth century. But, look back from that central chapter of its history, and there is a medieval planned town; look forward, and there is a cultural capital. In the more than 700 years of its history, Aberystwyth has played many parts — trading centre, seaside resort, social and cultural centre. These very different urban histories have produced a town of extraordinary architectural richness.

Key to Aberystwyth's distinctiveness is the way its long history can still be read in the shape and fabric of the town. The original medieval castle town bequeathed a regular town plan, still the framework for a typically tight and varied pattern of building several hundred years later. Its role as port and resort shaped the development of the town from the early nineteenth century — from the robust working character of its harbour, to the design for light and a view in the well-planned terraces of its urban extension and its suburbs. Towering above the town, literally and metaphorically, the great institutions of college, university and National Library are architectural as well as cultural landmarks.

A detailed economic and social history is imprinted on the fabric of the town. If the harbour was the focus of industrial and maritime trade from the outset, the principal streets of both the medieval town and its nineteenth-century extension were the venue for retail trade — the historic architecture of shopping can be traced in Aberystwyth's buildings from the early nineteenth century, and is an important component of its character today. Commerce depended on society; visible in the townscape from the large gentry houses to smaller artisan dwellings, in the hotels and boarding houses of the resort, and in a hierarchy of suburban houses from substantial villas to modest terraces.

These many building types are united by a coherent framework of urban planning and development patterns — individual plots along the street-grid of the old town, with formal streets of unified blocks and terraces in its

extension, and terraced rows and parades of villas in the suburbs. This long tradition of planning (from medieval walled town to twentieth-century housing estates) is an unusual and important feature of the town.

Aberystwyth boasts an exceptional architectural character of its own. Here is architecture of distinctive urban building types, in which the terraced house is pre-eminent, but in which shops, chapels and other institutions are also important. Building materials also play a vital part: abundant supplies of local stone were still being quarried for building in the early twentieth century. One of the glories of Aberystwyth, however, is the way in which the town's building craftsmen developed a rich architecture from render; another is the use they made of imported materials such as brick and terracotta. By the early twentieth century, Aberystwyth had become a town of colour, and of sumptuous detail.

If there is history to be found in every street, there is also a treasure trove of architectural detail and craftsmanship. Look after the detail, and the sheer quality of building in Aberystwyth could be today's source of 'wonder and delight'.



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Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales (RCAHMW)  
The National Monuments Record of Wales holds the national archive for the built heritage in Wales, including survey drawings, photographic surveys, aerial photographs, maps, reports, and historical archive material. Further information is available via Coflein, the free online database of the Royal Commission [www.coflein.gov.uk](http://www.coflein.gov.uk)

## Images and Photographs

Aberystwyth is fortunate in having been very well documented by artists and photographers from the late eighteenth century onwards. Important collections are held by the National Library of Wales, RCAHMW, Ceredigion Museum and Ceredigion Library (Aberystwyth), which has some of its collection online at:

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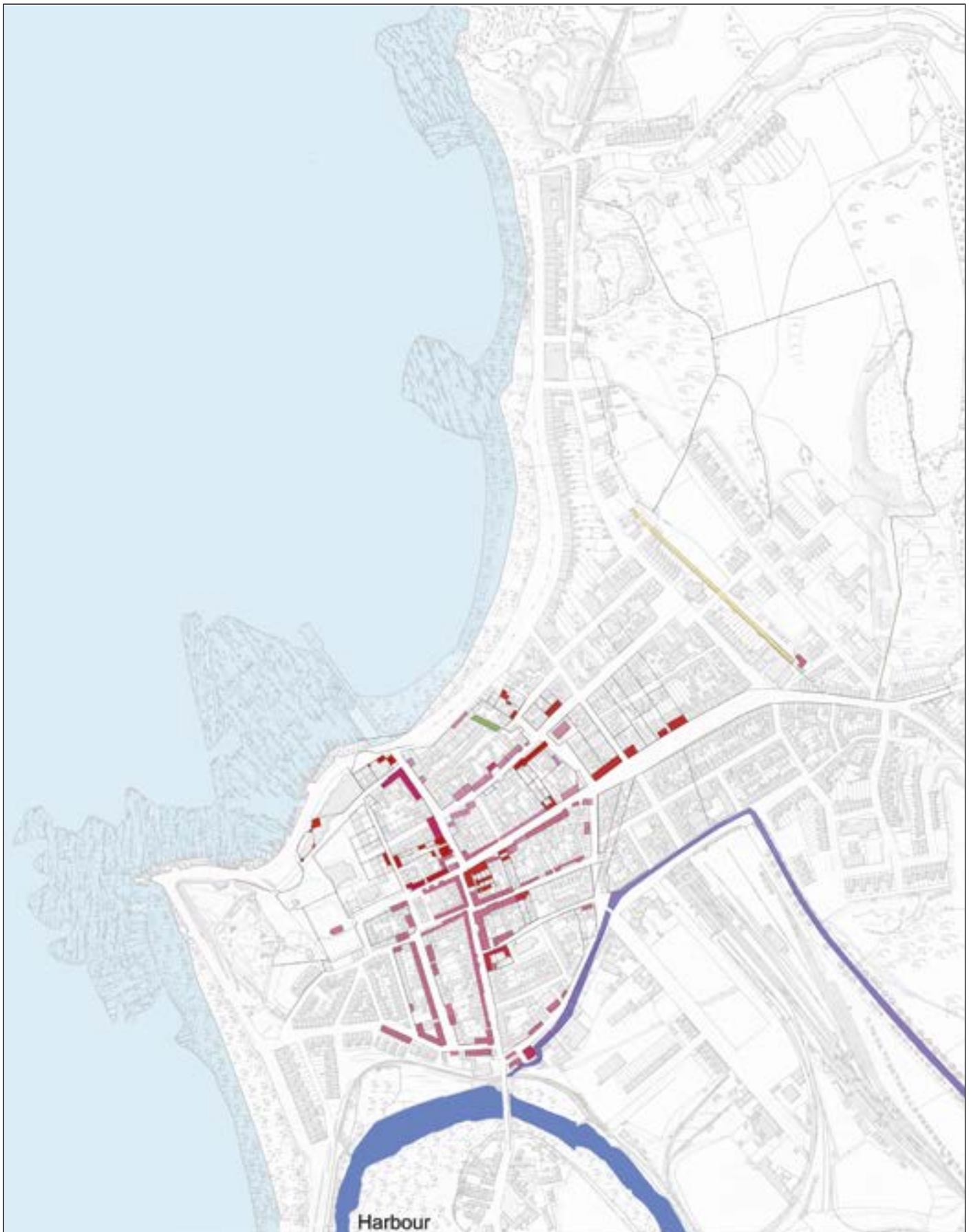
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65. T.O. Morgan, *New Guide to Aberystwyth and its Surroundings* (Aberystwyth, 1864).
66. John Davies, *A History of Wales* (Harmondsworth, 1993).
67. John Davies, *A History of Wales* (Harmondsworth, 1993).

| The medieval town, showing walls, roads, burgages and built-up area

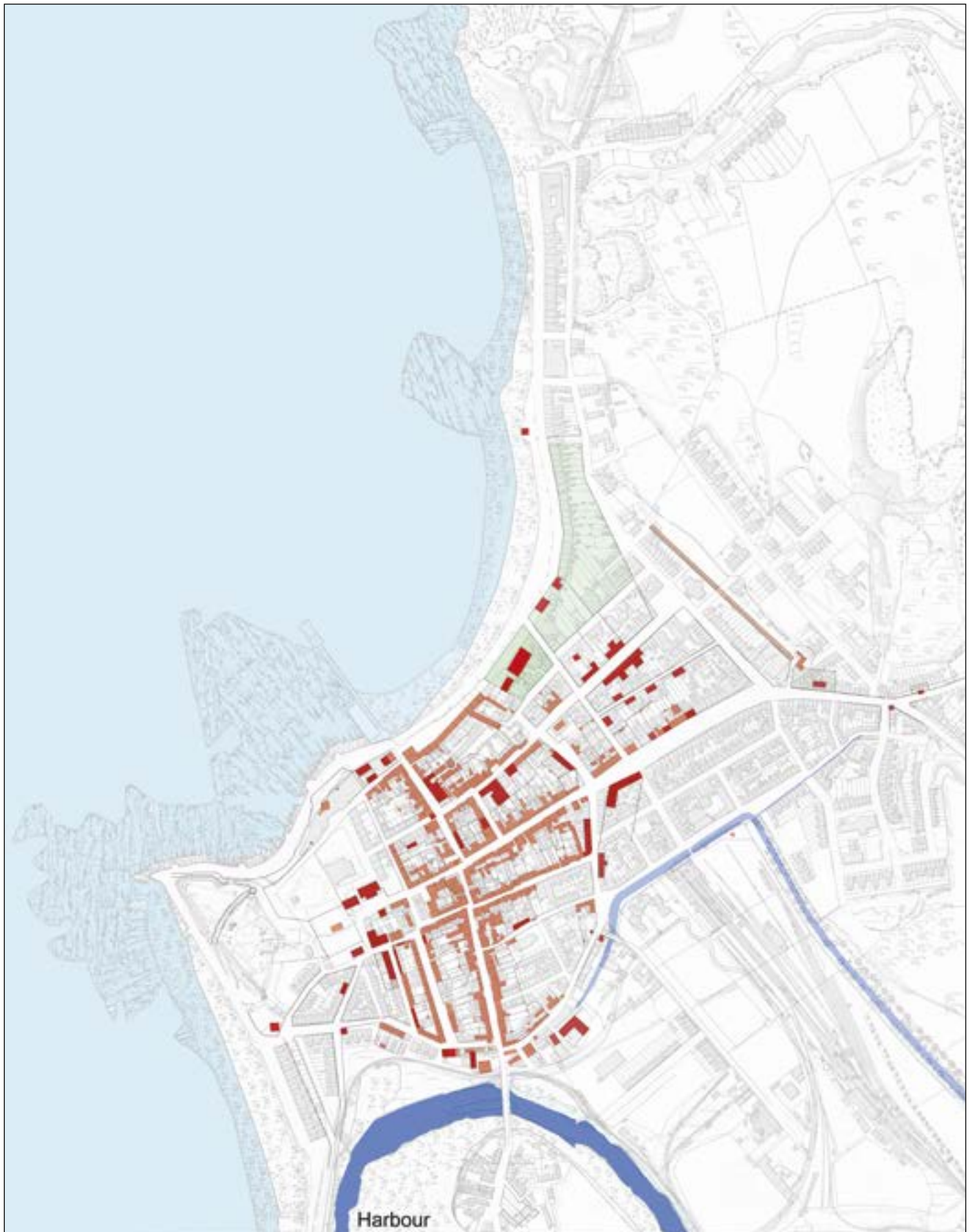




## 2 The town in about 1800

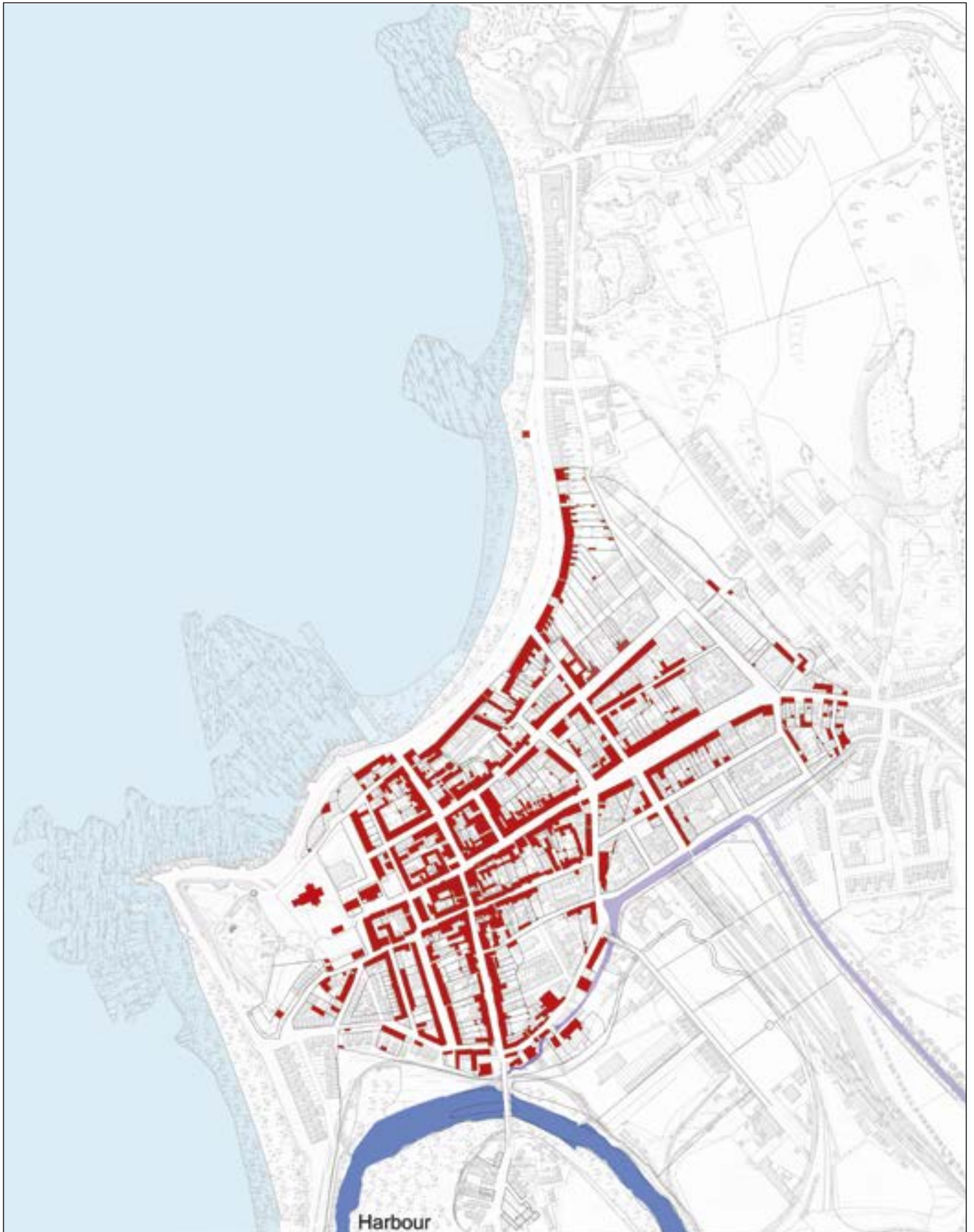


### 3 The town in about 1820–21

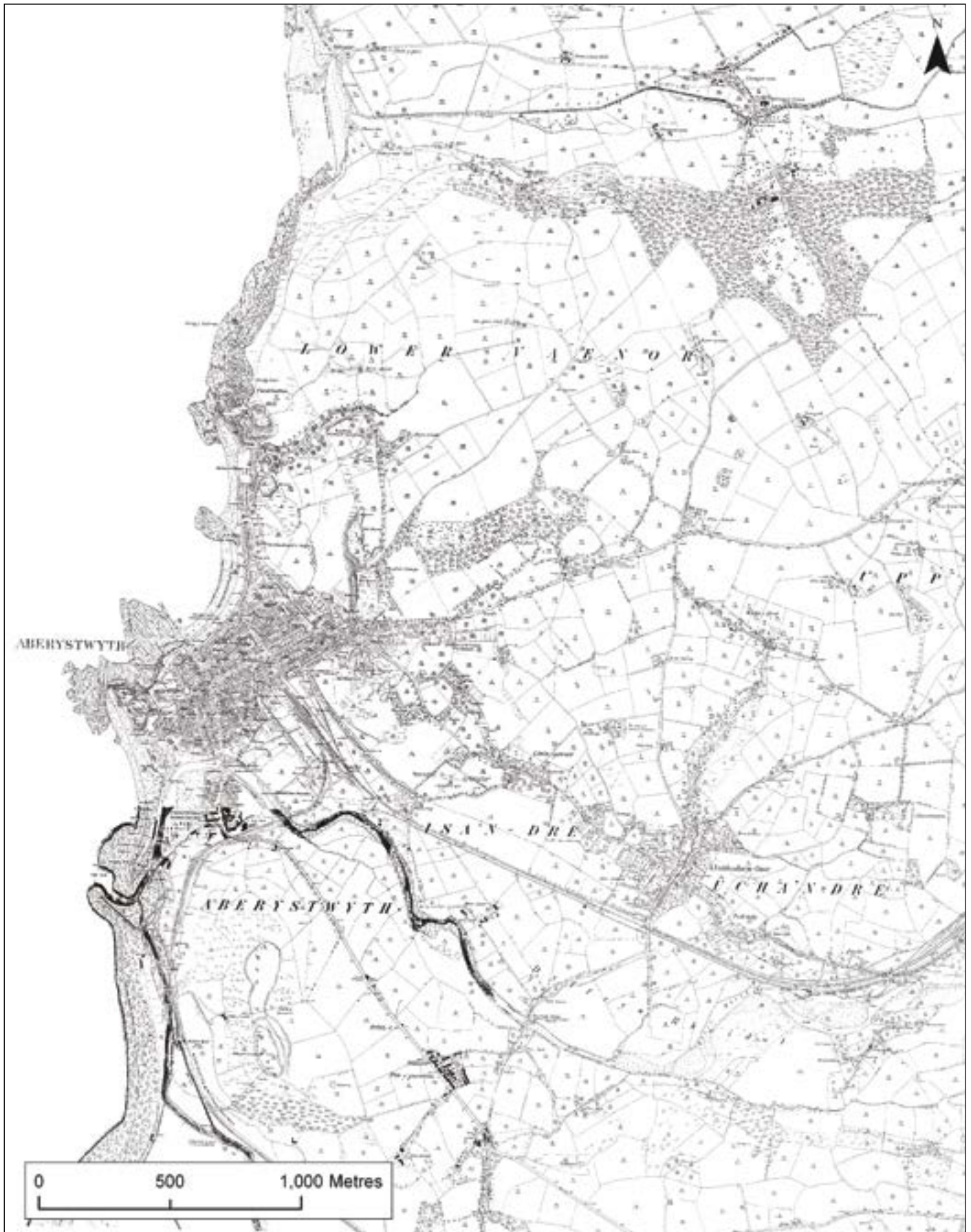




4 The town in 1834

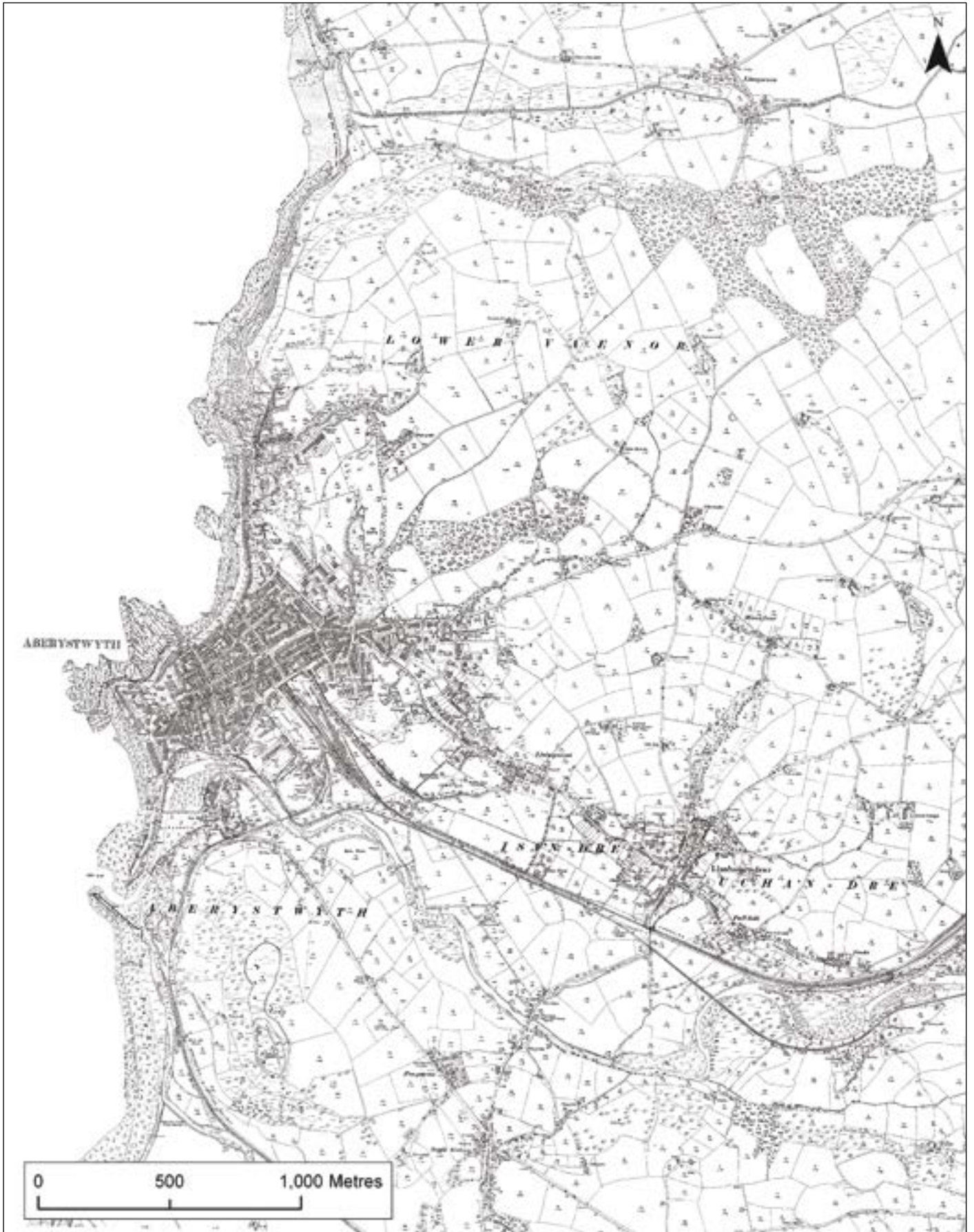


5 The town in 1889



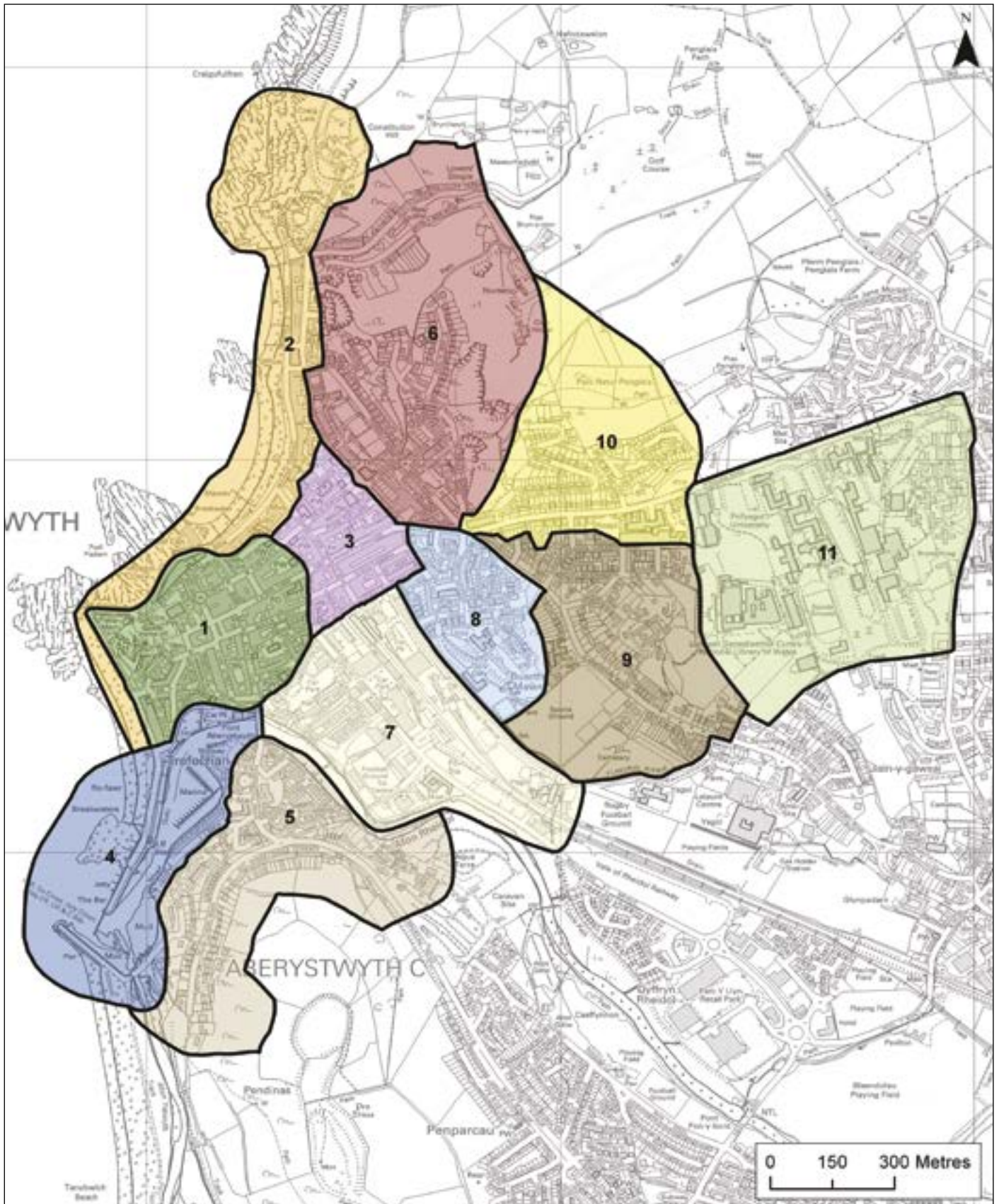


6 The town in 1905



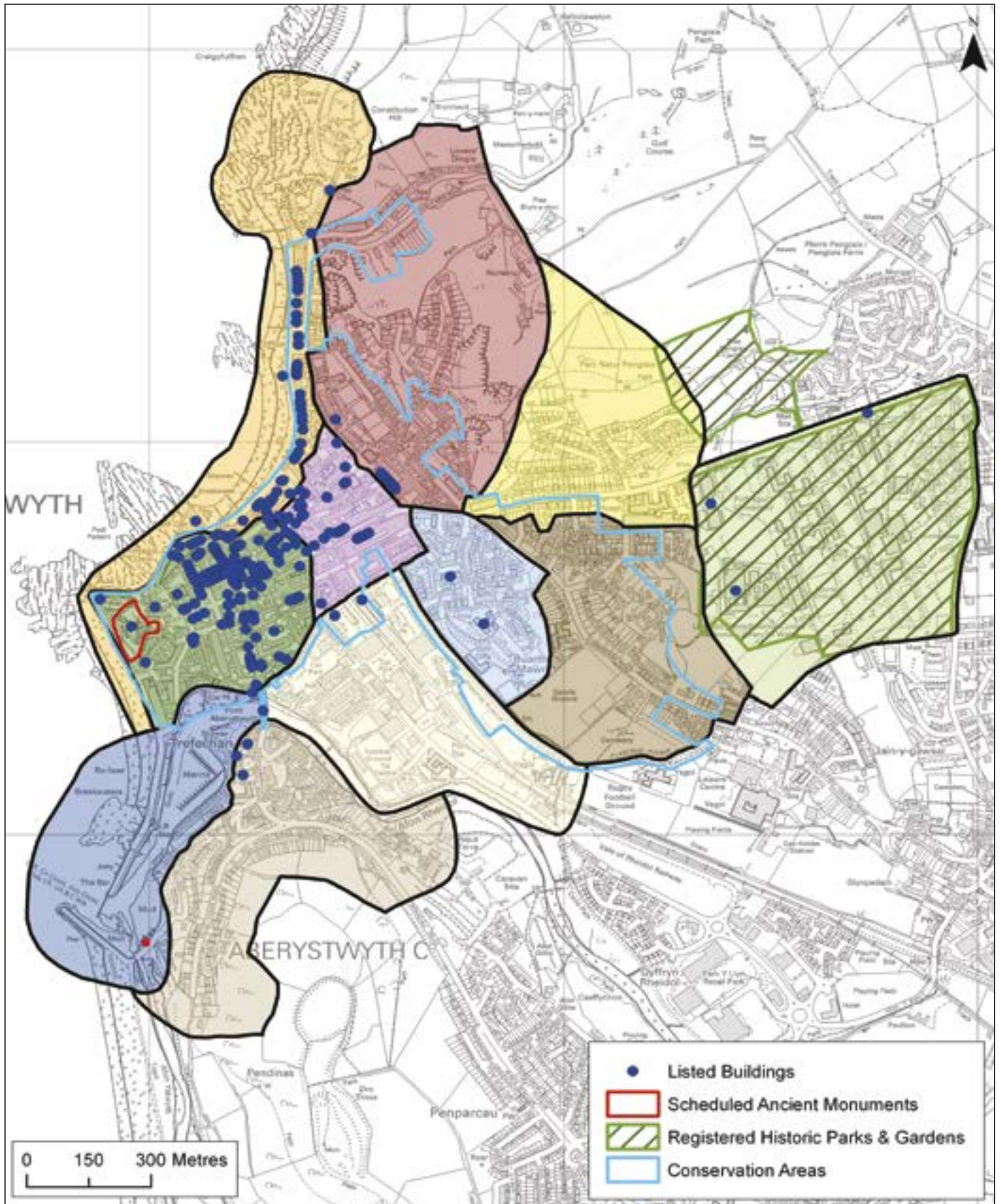


7 All Character Areas





8 All Character Areas with Scheduled Ancient Monuments, Listed Buildings, Registered Parks and Gardens and the Conservation Area



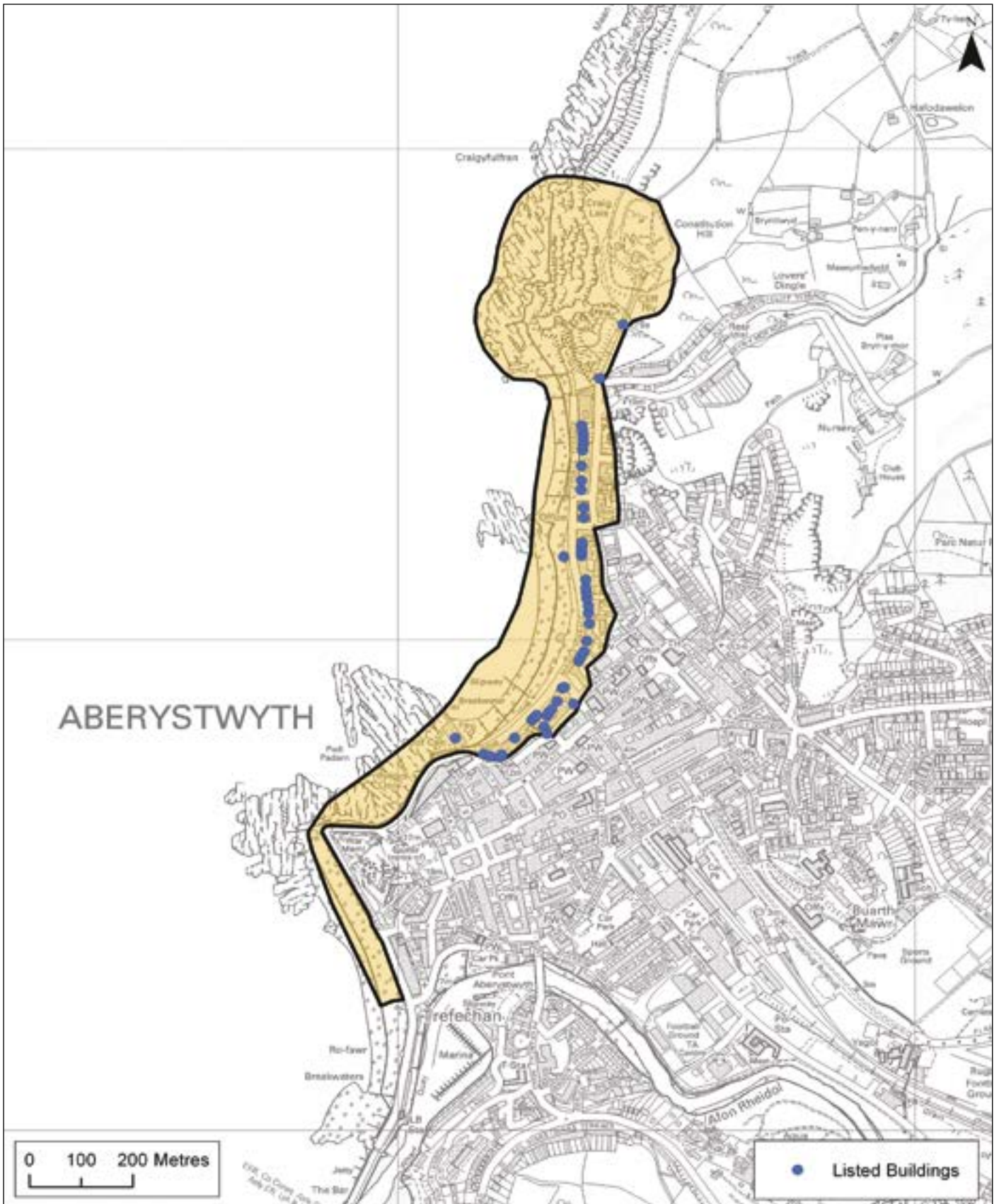


9 The Old Town (area I)

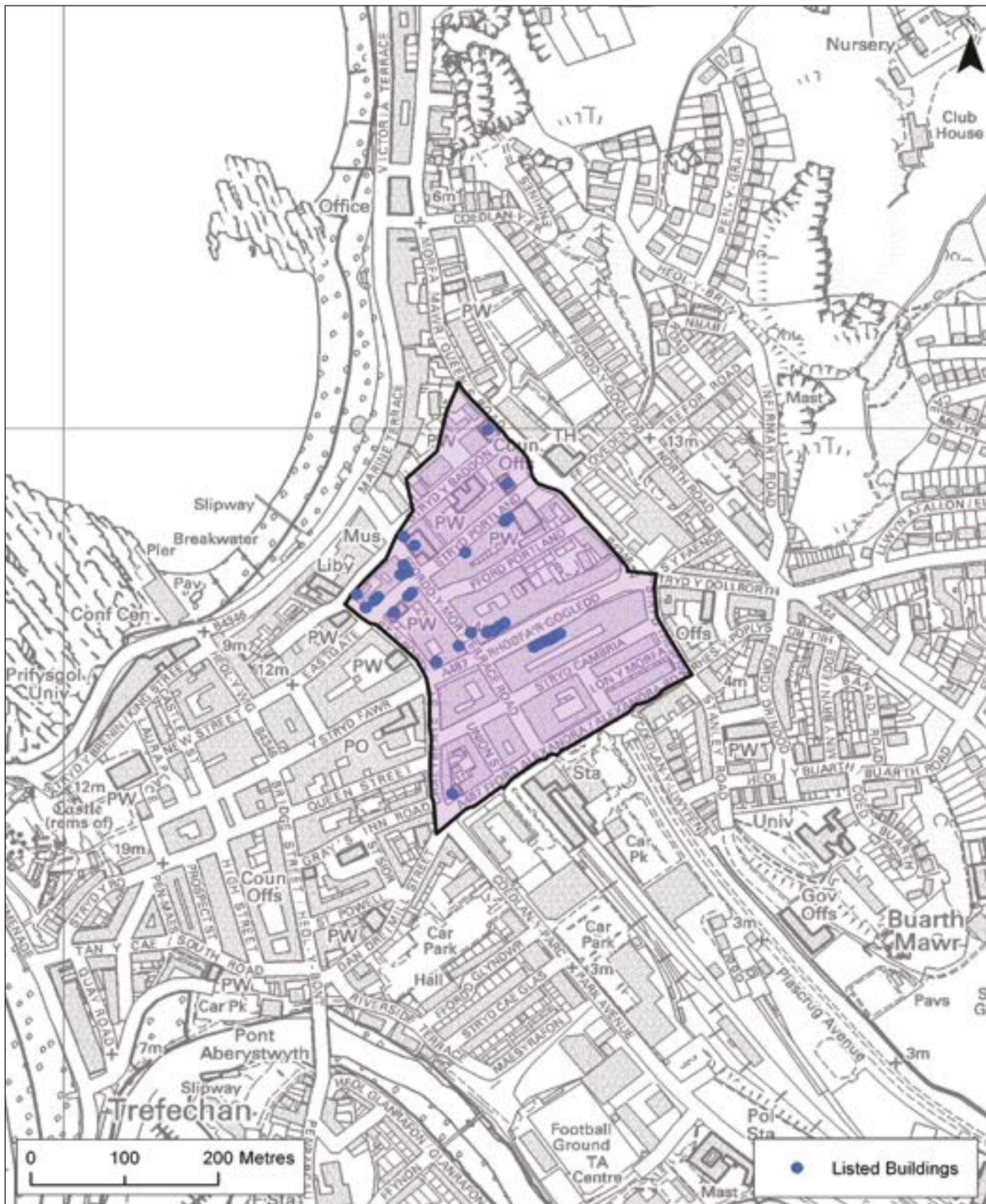




10 Marine Terrace and The Promenade (area 2)

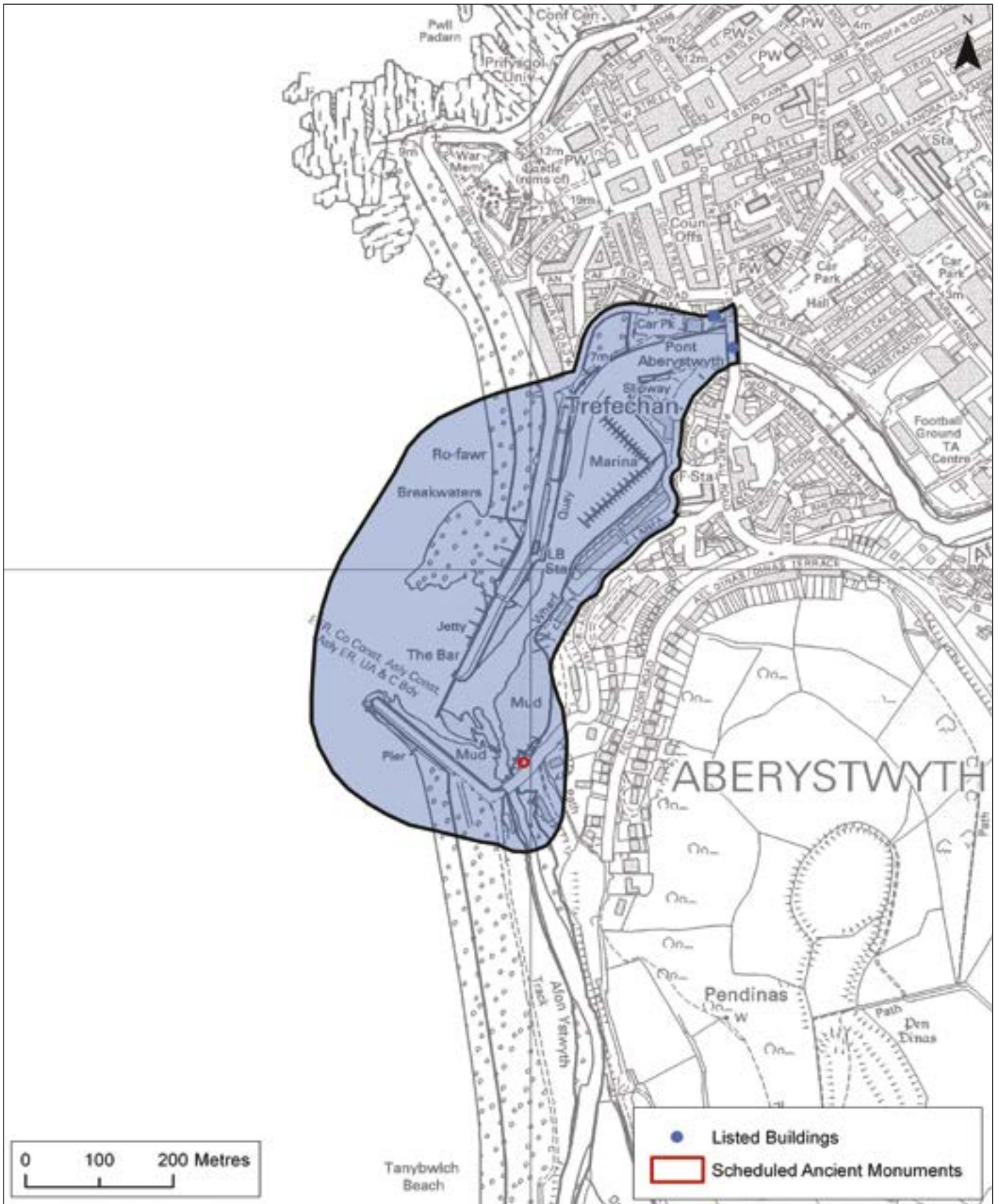


II Owain Glyndŵr Square, North Parade, Portland Street, Alexandra Road and Terrace Road (area 3)

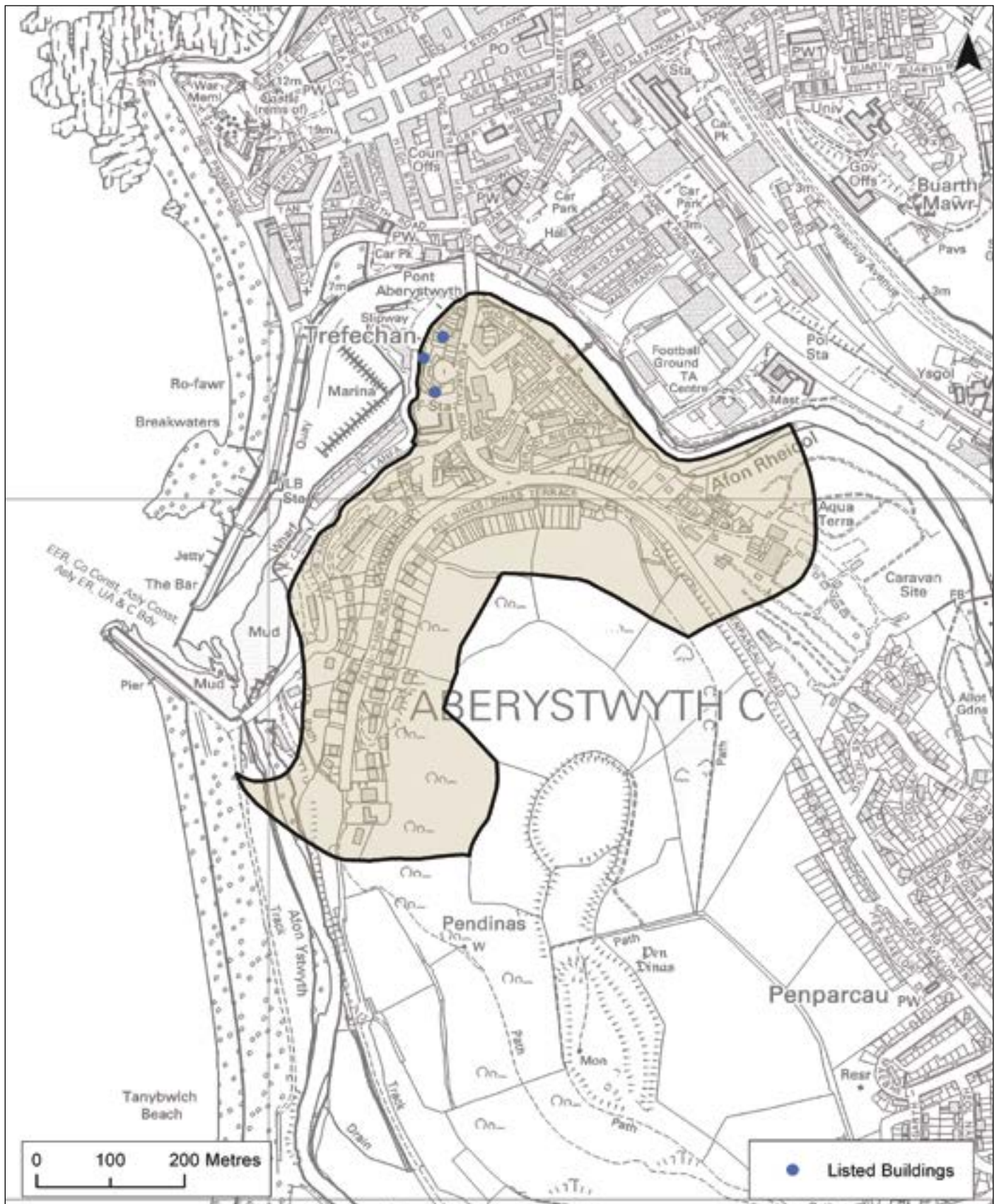




12 The Harbour (area 4)

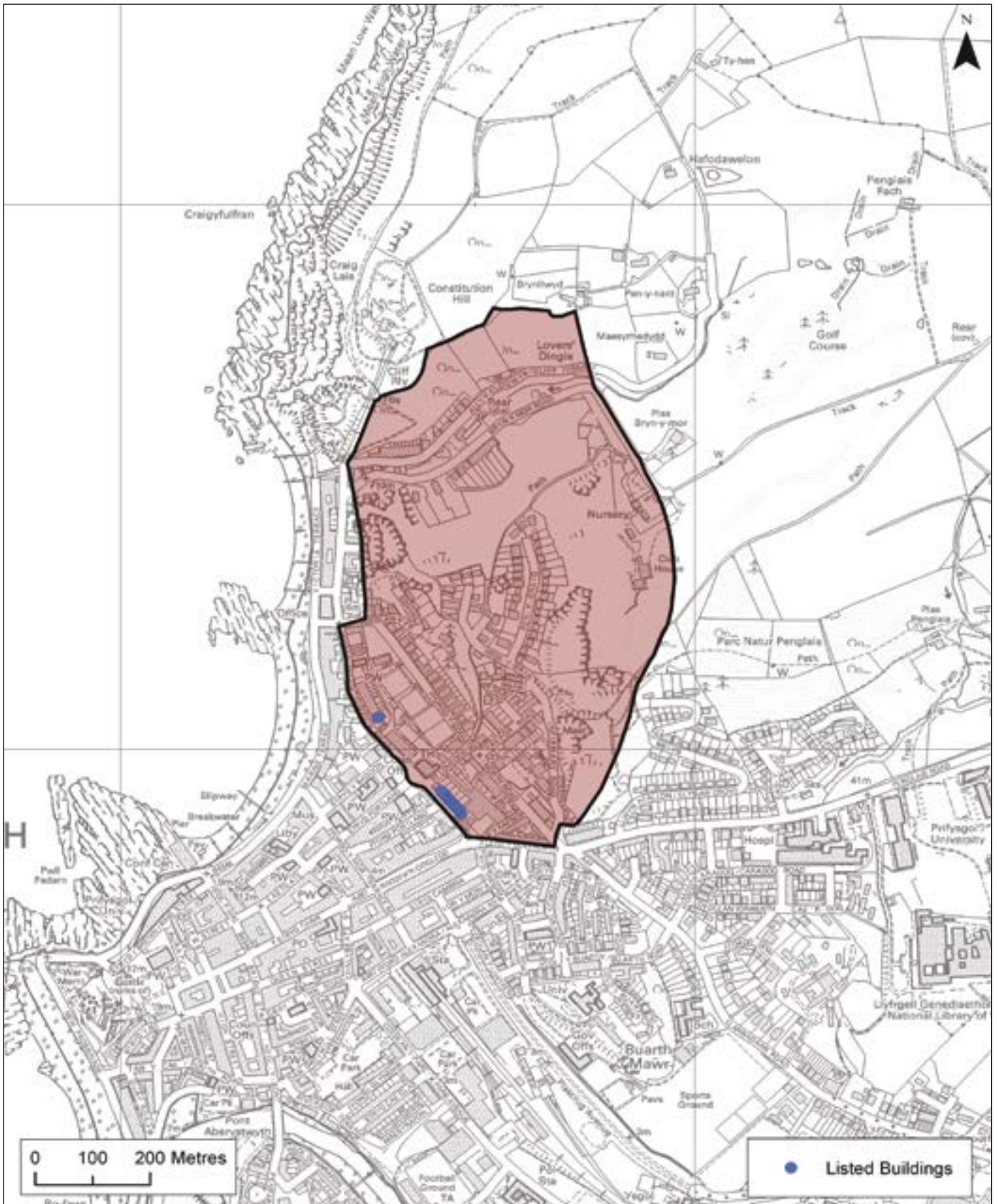


### 13 Trefechan (area 5)



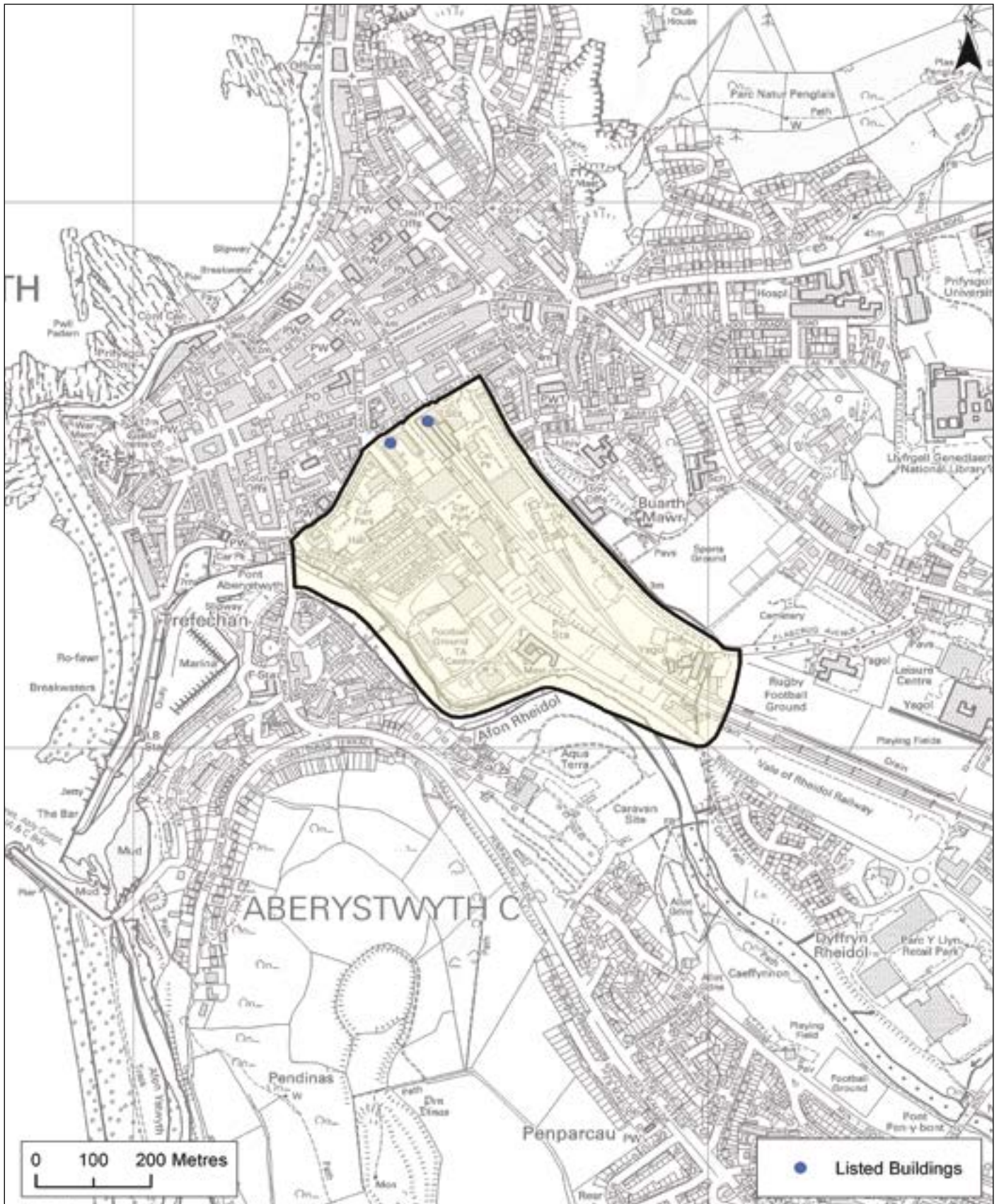


14 Queen's Road and North Road Area (area 6)



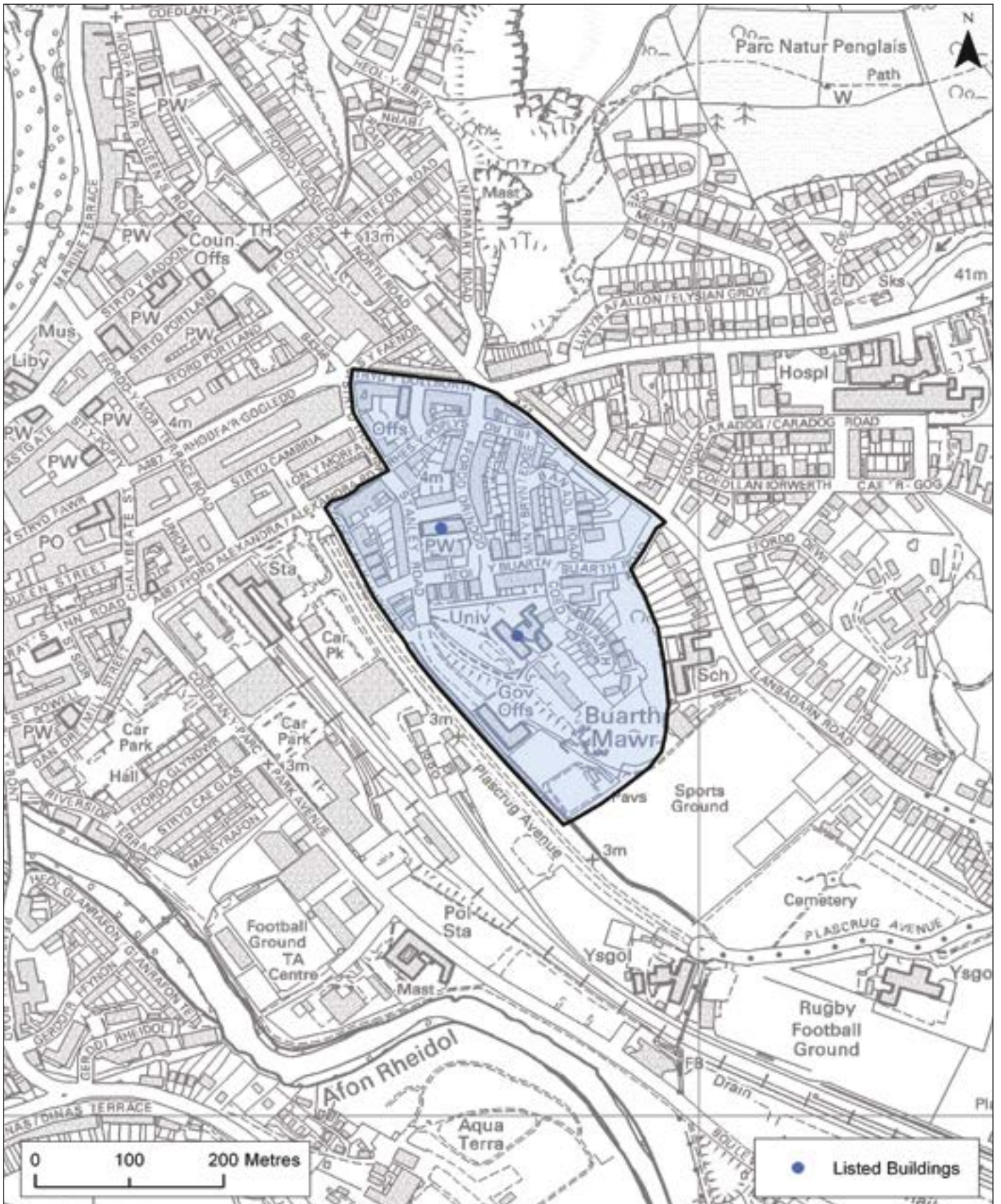


15 Park Avenue Area (area 7)





16 The Buarth and Plas Crug (area 8)



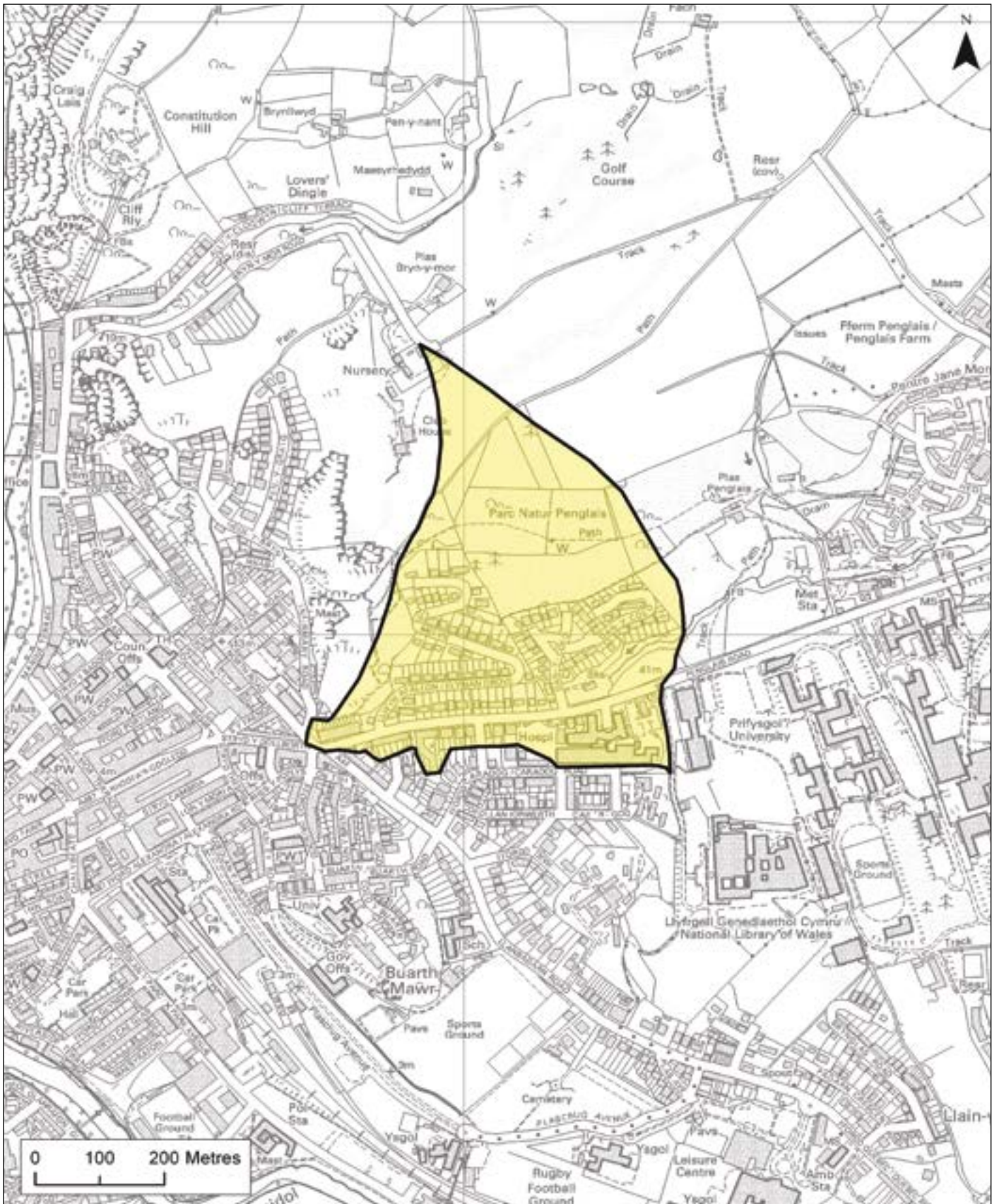


17 Llanbadarn Road Area (area 9)





18 Penglais (area 10)





### 19 The National Library and the University Campus (area II)

