

MERTHYR TYDFIL TOWN CENTRE CONSERVATION AREA CHARACTER APPRAISAL

**Merthyr Tydfil County Borough
Council**

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Merthyr Tydfil Town Centre Conservation Area

Merthyr Tydfil lies at the northern end of the Taff Valley, South Wales, approximately 30 kilometres to the north west of central Cardiff. The town centre stands on the east bank of the River Taff amidst a mountainous setting. It contains the historic commercial, religious and administrative centre of the industrial district that developed between the mid-18th and early 20th centuries, creating the first major industrial town in Wales. During this period the area was transformed from a small valley-floor village into a thriving town centre. The evolution of this townscape was achieved through successive stages of opportunistic building without planning or design, as well as the establishment of planned grids of streets by wealthy individuals and the erection of public buildings through communal endeavour and later development under the centralised control of the Local Board and the Urban District Council.

The buildings of the town centre provide structures that therefore represent each stage of this development. In addition they provide structures representing each of the main functions of the town centre, including historically important inns, shops, churches, chapels and civic buildings including the Town Hall, General Hospital and Public Library. The area's role as the central place in the district encouraged ostentatious investment in the architecture of these buildings displaying the wealth and pride of individuals, organisations and, latterly, the town's civic authority.

The town centre has a strong linear form based on a central High Street with numerous broad side streets and smaller lanes and courts. The dense urban development provides good enclosure of spaces, although attractive views out to the surrounding mountainous countryside are seen from many locations by looking along the line of streets which lead off High Street. Street frontages are of consistent scale and massing but formed by buildings with a great variety of architectural style, including examples of late Regency Classical, Gothic Revival and Baroque design. The retention of original architectural features, including decorative render, and terracotta mouldings and intricate joinery on original timber framed windows, provides a high level of architectural interest on many of the unlisted historic buildings. The survival of distinctive and intricately detailed historic shopfronts makes a particular contribution to the character of the area.

Although the town centre maintains a certain level of economic activity other functions of the area have moved elsewhere during the second half of the 20th century, whilst other activities have declined with the end of the heavy industry that instigated and maintained the area's development. Civic administration moved from the Town Hall to a modern Civic Centre, the YMCA became obsolete and the General Hospital was replaced by more modern facilities elsewhere. Shortages of funding and lack of economic incentive for redevelopment have resulted in the deterioration of many of these large, obsolete historic buildings. The task of restoring and conserving them will be a major challenge for the future of the conservation area. The town centre's economy also faces the challenge of changing shopping and social habits and will need to evolve to exploit new opportunities.

However, the planned regeneration of the town centre has already begun, starting with investments in historic buildings and public realm improvements. It is expected that major regeneration projects will encourage further investment in the area in the near future. Preserving the special historic and architectural interest of the area, conserving its character and exploiting opportunities to enhance its character and appearance will all be important factors in considering the suitability of proposals for such new development. Careful planning will be required to ensure that regeneration and conservation work together to ensure the preservation and improvement of the town centre's abundant but fragile heritage assets. Designation of the Merthyr Tydfil Town Centre Conservation Area and preparation

of this Character Appraisal represents the first step in this process of heritage-led regeneration.

1.2 Summary of key characteristics

The key characteristics of the Merthyr Tydfil Town Centre Conservation Area are:

- A town centre developed from the late 18th century as a result of rapid and massive industrial development and population growth, continuing to function as the district's main high street shopping area into the 21st century;
- The concentration of 23 listed buildings and numerous other locally listed buildings and street frontages, creating an area of high architectural interest;
- The concentration of commercial, civic, social and spiritual uses relating to the development of Merthyr Tydfil as an industrial town of international importance between the late 18th and early 20th centuries;
- Landmark buildings of particular architectural quality, which emphasise each of the above historic functions of the area;
- Dense urban development of mainly narrow frontages on the backs of pavements, creating varied elevations and a noticeable sense of enclosure;
- A strong linear form created by the long axis of Penydarren Road, Pontmorlais High Street, and High Street, with numerous short side streets providing ready access to and from surrounding areas;
- Attractive views along street lines to focal points, landmark buildings and out to mountain scenery;
- A variety of architectural styles and materials, with details relating to the late Classical, Gothic Revival and Edwardian Baroque movements.

1.3 The planning policy context

Conservation areas are designated under the provisions of Section 69 of the *Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990*. Local planning authorities are required by the same legislation to routinely review their conservation areas, and to assess whether further areas need to be designated. This work was undertaken in the case of Merthyr Tydfil Town Centre in 2008 when the Council produced a Built Heritage Strategy and Action Plan, adopted by the Council in December 2008.

A conservation area is defined as '*an area of special architectural or historic interest the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance*'. Section 71 of the 1990 Act also requires local planning authorities to formulate and publish proposals for the preservation and enhancement of these conservation areas. Section 72 also specifies that, in making a decision on an application for development within a conservation area, special attention must be paid to the desirability of preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of that area. The production of a 'Character Appraisal' therefore enables a local planning authority to identify what makes each conservation area unique, so that these features can be protected when applications for change are received. By also identifying 'negative' sites or buildings, where change would actually be welcomed, a Character Appraisal also provides a framework for future actions which are usually considered in greater detail in the subsequent Management Plan.

This document should be read in conjunction with Welsh planning policy guidance, particularly Circular 61/96 - *Planning and the Historic Environment: Historic Buildings and Conservation Areas* and Circular 1/98 - *Planning and the Historic Environment: Directions by the Secretary of State for Wales*. These documents provide advice on the designation of

conservation areas, and the importance of assessing the special interest of each one in an up to date Character Appraisal.

The existing development plan framework in Merthyr Tydfil is provided by:-

- The adopted Mid Glamorgan (Merthyr Tydfil County Borough) Replacement Structure Plan 1991-2006
- The adopted Merthyr Tydfil Borough Local Plan 1994 – 2006
- The deposit Merthyr Tydfil Local Development Plan 2006-2021.

National Policy Guidance is reiterated under Policies EV9 and EV10 of the Structure Plan in stating that development of features of the built and historic environment or environmental improvement schemes will not be permitted where it is likely to damage the existing character of structures designated as being of special architectural or historic interest.

The Merthyr Tydfil Borough Local Plan was adopted in May 1999. The plan sets out the Council's aspirations for protecting and enhancing the historic environment and states how applications affecting Conservation Areas will be assessed. Policy BH2 relates directly to the management of Conservation Areas. Additionally, Policies BH3 (Archaeology and Ancient Monuments), BH4 (Listed Buildings and Structures of Special Architectural and Historic Interest) and BH5 (Buildings and Structures of Local Architectural and Historic Merit) are important in determining applications relating to Conservation Areas.

Furthermore, the Deposit Local Development Plan for Merthyr Tydfil considers the historic built environment as a precious resource that can be harnessed in a sustainable manner for the purposes of regeneration, and affords for its protection and safeguarding. Policy BW6 states that proposals must not have an unacceptable impact on historic and cultural features of acknowledged importance. The designation of Merthyr Tydfil Town Centre as a Conservation Area strengthens the basis on which this policy is applied.

1.4 Community involvement

This Character Appraisal was commissioned by Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council following the adoption of the Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Built Heritage Strategy and Action Plan by full Council on 12 December 2008, which identified Merthyr Tydfil Town Centre as an area of special historic interest and architectural interest. Public consultation was undertaken in March 2009 with an exhibition at Merthyr Tydfil Public Library, including a draft of this Character Appraisal, and a walk-in surgery event held on (fill in date). The draft Character Appraisal was also made available on the Council's website throughout the consultation period. In addition, a questionnaire was provided which invited comments on the following:

- The desirability of designating a Merthyr Tydfil Town Centre Conservation Area;
- Views on the historic interest of the area;
- Views on the key positive features of the area;
- Views on any negative features or issues that detracted from the area's character and appearance.

Following the completion of the public consultation period, a Public Consultations Report (available on request from the Borough Council), was prepared and the text of both documents amended in response to comments from the public. A fully illustrated Character Appraisal was produced by the end of March 2009.

2 LOCATION AND LANDSCAPE SETTING

2.1 Location and activities

Merthyr Tydfil town centre is located in the Taff Valley, South Wales, in the north of Merthyr Tydfil County Borough. It lies approximately 30 kilometres to the north west of central Cardiff near the northern end of the Taff Valley. The Brecon Beacons National Park lies approximately 3 kilometres to the north of the town. Historic road and rail links run through and into the town centre, including the Taff Valley Branch Railway Line. The A465 Heads of the Valleys Road, the A470 Cardiff to Brecon road, and the A460, create a triangle of modern A-roads surrounding the town centre and associated residential areas.

The town centre serves as the main high street shopping area for the County Borough, as well as preserving spiritual and social functions. The historic importance of this area as the administrative centre of the district has now been diminished as a result of the development of the modern Civic Centre, which lies directly to the west. The majority of buildings in the town centre continue to serve as shops, including a high proportion of locally-owned businesses, with a growing number of cafés. Shops in the Pontmorlais area in the north of the conservation area include a large number of hot-food takeaways which normally remain closed until the early evening, creating a quieter sub-area during the day. In recent years the development of out-of-town shopping developments and supermarkets has put considerable pressure on the economy of the town centre. A number of commercial premises in the town centre were vacant at the time of the survey in February 2009. A number of national banks and building societies have premises within the High Street, which continue to form hubs of activity.

Churches and chapels are focused on High Street and High Street, Pontmorlais, including St Tydfil's Anglican Church, the High Street Baptist Chapel, St David's Roman Catholic Church and the Hope and Market Street United Church, which all continue to host religious services. The former Zoar Congregationalist Chapel at High Street, Pontmorlais has been converted into a Welsh Language Cultural Centre, whilst the Wesleyan Methodist Church, just to the north, was converted for use as commercial premises but is currently vacant.

Former civic buildings including the Town Hall and County Court, High Street, the Employment Exchange and District Education Department Offices (formerly the YMCA), both at Pontmorlais, and the Merthyr Tydfil Nursing Home (formerly the General Hospital), Penydarren Road are currently vacant and have fallen into varying levels of disrepair and dereliction. The former Water Board Offices on Castle Street house the Council's Social Services Department, whilst the Merthyr Tydfil Public Library continues to provide a valuable resource for the community, including housing the County Borough's local history collections.

Social functions of the town centre include cafes in the High Street area and public houses, although it appears that the latter are gradually retreating to the peripheries of the town centre. The remaining public houses include the Crown Inn at the southern end of High Street, Dic Penderyn at the north end of High Street, the Anchor and the Imperial Hotel, both on High Street, Pontmorlais and a group of public houses on Glebeland Street. The Morlais Tavern at High Street, Pontmorlais survives but is unoccupied, whilst the former Ye Olde Express, also on High Street, Pontmorlais has been converted to a Chinese Restaurant named the Orient Express. The former Vulcan and Friendship House, which stood directly to the south has been converted to a private residence. Private clubs include the Conservative Club on Masonic Lane, The Labour Club on Court Road, and the Masonic Temple at Pontmorlais.

Areas to the east and north of the town centre, including the northern part of the conservation area on Penydarren Road, are largely residential. To the west, the later 20th century extension of the town centre includes blocks of flats, a primary school, St Tydfil's

shopping precinct and bus station, as well as civic buildings that include council offices and the Police Station. Employment areas lie to the south.

2.2 Topography and geology

The town centre occupies the floor of the Taff Valley on the east bank of the river with steeply rising valley sides to the east and north. The dense urban development and proximity of rising ground restricts views to the east and north although the landmark buildings at Pontmorlais stand on a ridge of higher ground that gives them extra prominence in the townscape. A high, man-made ridge of land runs westward from Pontmorlais creating another visual barrier to the north west and marking the northern limit of both the historic town centre and its more recent extension to the west. Views from open spaces and along streets to the wider area include the town's attractive mountainous surroundings. The high ground to the east of the town centre, including the area around St Tydfil's Hospital and the park at Thomas Town, provided excellent vantage points for views down into the conservation area.

In the vicinity of Merthyr Tydfil the geological strata consists of Pennant sandstone lying over carboniferous coal measures and shaley rock. The sandstone was used in some of the oldest buildings in the town centre, including The Court (the Labour Club) and the Crown Inn. The evidence of its use for the less prestigious elevations of other buildings can be glimpsed in alleyways and passages leading off the High Street. It was also used to construct small industrial structures and ancillary buildings in yards and backlands. The low status attached to this material was partly a result of its production as a by-product of the industrial processes that supported the town's economy. This stone was also considered to be highly porous, resulting in damp living conditions. As a result even the smallest cottages built using this stone in the early 19th century were whitewashed to provide a more waterproof coating.

Cement render, painted and unpainted, has been used widely to provide a weather coating to stonework and, later, to brickwork, on the elevations of the more prestigious buildings. In the early and mid 19th century, ornamental mouldings were formed in render stucco to represent the Classical orders. In the later 19th century good quality brick and moulded terracotta detailing provided an alternative to stone or render. The Thomas Town brickworks, located just to the south west of the town centre, exploited local sources of brick clay to provide much of the material used in later building works in the area.

The growth of railway transport in the early 19th century allowed the importation of building materials including slate tiles from North Wales, brick and terracotta. Later in the century more exotic materials were imported such as glazed brick, moulded terracotta and even marble. Buildings constructed in the late 19th and early 20th century also make ostentatious use of timber on their principal frontages.

2.3 Relationship of the conservation area to its surroundings

The numerous side streets leading off the High Street provide good access for pedestrians into the town centre. Large car parks are now located to the south east and north west, whilst the southern part of the High Street has been partially pedestrianised, with limited access for taxis. The large roundabout to the south of the town centre and the bus station forecourt to the west create less pedestrian friendly areas. The railway line and its viaduct, which run up the south eastern edge of the town centre, create one barrier to easy movement. At present access between the railway station and the High Street is either through the Beacon's shopping arcade or across a small footbridge leading into the backstreet of Masonic Lane.

Views from within the town centre are partially contained by the surrounding buildings. The rising ground to the north and west also limits views in these directions. The buildings of Thomas Town cover the hillside to the east although it is the less well maintained rear

elevations of buildings that are seen presenting an untidy urban scene. From the north eastern limit of the conservation area the view from Penydarren Road opens out again with an extensive view down into the Morlais Valley

The town centre's position on the eastern side of the valley, at one of its broadest points, provides opportunities for long views across the valley to the slopes of Mynydd Aberdar and Mynydd Gethin, which are covered in a mixture of woodland and the abandoned spoil tips of former mines and collieries. Views to these areas are glimpsed down the side streets becoming more expansive at the ends of the streets where they open out into the more modern landscape to the west.

2.4 Merthyr Tydfil's Industrial Heritage and the Landscape Setting

Merthyr Tydfil lay at the heart of an expansive industrial district which had a massive and lasting impact on the surrounding landscape. Its very location was determined by the central position between the Plymouth, Cyfarthfa and Penydarren ironworks, for which it provided town centre functions (Dowlais initially developed its own small town centre). As a result of the proximity of the ironworks and mines, and their importance in the livelihood of the town, it is unsurprising that elements of their activities spilled over into the town centre. However, their absorption into the townscape has in some ways disguised their true nature, which would benefit from being highlighted.

The Glamorganshire Canal was built in 1790 with support from the owners of the four largest ironworks in Merthyr Tydfil to enable the export of large loads of iron from the works to the docks at Cardiff. Its course lies to the west of the River Taff, some distance from the town centre. However, the canal was linked to each ironworks by a network of tramways along which carts were pulled by horses. One of the tramways, leading to the Penydarren and Dowlais works, ran up Pontmorlais West and Penydarren Road and along the terrace on its north side. Indeed, it appears likely that the tramways were created first, and were later adopted as roads around which the townscape developed.

The Penydarren Tramroad was built in 1802 to provide a faster transport route to Abercynon for the produce of the Dowlais, Plymouth and Penydarren Ironworks. It has achieved industrial celebrity as a result of being the first tramway or railway on which a steam locomotive was used to pull a load. This occurred as a result of a wager between the masters of the Cyfarthfa and Penydarren Ironworks. The engineer Richard Trevithic was employed by Samuel Homfray to design and build an engine that would haul a 10 ton load of iron to Abercynon from Penydarren, a feat which was achieved on 14th February 1804. The course of the tramway is preserved as roads or paths for much of its course and defines a large section of the eastern boundary of the Town Centre Conservation Area. In places houses were built facing directly onto the tramway, which was used as a road by many pedestrians, whilst in other areas it is hemmed in by the featureless rear walls of yards and buildings.

The manmade ridge of land just to the north west of the town centre is a large spoil or cinder heap created from waste materials produced by the Penydarren Iron works. It was remarked upon in the 1840s, both for its position, running up to the edge of the town centre, and because of the construction of housing on it, illustrating the pressure on land created by Merthyr's rapidly increasing population. Indeed, the neighbourhood built on and around it was named Newfoundland and is recorded as such on the 1st Edition of the 6" Ordnance Survey map. Housing still stands on the top of the heap, which also provides a good viewpoint looking over the town centre. The settlement of China, described as a notorious den of thieves in the middle of the 19th century, was separated from the town centre by this cinder tip.

As mentioned above, there are occasional glimpsed views out to the former industrial landscapes on Mynydd Gethin and Mynydd Aberdar, including the disused spoil heaps

surrounding Heolgerrig. This area of historic industrial landscape was described as nationally important in Gwent Glamorgan Archaeological Trust's (GGAT) Historic Landscape Characterisation of the Registered Landscape of Special Historic Importance in Wales (see below).

2.5 The Registered Landscape of Special Historic Interest in Wales

In 1998 and 2001, as a first step towards raising the profile of historic landscapes in Wales, Cadw, CCW and ICOMOS (UK)(International Council on Monuments and Sites) published the two-volume Register of Landscapes of Historic Interest in Wales. This advisory and non-statutory document highlights what are considered to be the best examples of different types of historic landscape in Wales. Approximately a third of the County Borough was identified as forming such an area in recognition of the well preserved and widespread remains of the area's internationally important ironworking industry. The town centre represents an important part of the social and economic landscape that makes up this area.

2.6 Biodiversity

The town centre is densely built up, with few expected opportunities for wildlife, although historic buildings normally provide more nesting and roosting opportunities for birds and bats than their modern counterparts.

The Morlais stream runs through the northern part of the conservation area. Once highly polluted, the stream is now a wildlife corridor through the town, although it would benefit from increased natural daylight through the management of the banks. It runs down to join the River Taff although the confluence is covered by the complex of buildings and highways in the modern Civic Centre to the west of the conservation area. The River Taff is a fast flowing mountain river at this point, with exposed islands of rock and gravel, rising from a stony bed. Dippers (*Cinclus cinclus*) can be seen perched on rocks at the river's edge or hunting for aquatic invertebrates, whilst only metres away cars and lorries pass along the Avenue de Clichy.

A less positive element of biodiversity is the invasion of self-seeded plants, particularly buddleia, which are growing on many historic buildings and in untended yards and open spaces. Without appropriate action this menace will result in increasing damage to the facades and even structures of historic buildings throughout the town centre. The extent of damage is already considered to be severe and the price of clearance and repairs is expected to be high.

3 HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT AND ARCHAEOLOGY

3.1 Historical development

The conservation area contains the medieval village and early industrial settlement core of Merthyr Tydfil with areas of commercial expansion into the parish glebe and the lands of the Court Estate. These grew together with an early focus of commercial activity at Pontmorlais and a focus of civic buildings and housing on the redeveloped land of the Penydarren Ironworks and Penydarren Park to form Merthyr Tydfil's town centre.

The medieval village was focussed on St Tydfil's Church, Maerdy House (which stood in the area of the Lower High Street Square) and The Court House. The early urban development of this area followed the foundation of the first ironworks at the head of the Taff Valley between 1759 and 1765. William Yates' map of Glamorgan of 1799 records the area of this development with a northern limit at Swan Street. The early urban expansion was opportunistic, developing small plots of land as they arose without any control or planning, creating a cramped and disorganised streetscape of small groups of cottages and inns set at odd angles to each other and the road.

Tramways were built in the north of the conservation area to link the Penydarren and Dowlais Ironworks to the Glamorganshire Canal, which was completed in 1794. These were rapidly adopted as roads, forming the alignments of Penydarren Road and Pontmorlais West. The creation of a route between the early urban core and the tramway, via a bridge across the Morlais Stream, provided the impetus for urban development along in the north. Again, this development was largely uncontrolled creating a scattered pattern of buildings along a sinuous route with numerous small buildings filling plots behind the street frontages. Many inns were built to serve the social needs of the town's working people. The mixing of peoples from across England and Wales introduced new religious beliefs. Freedom from the traditional controls of rural life encouraged freedom of thought, whilst religious faith provided an escape from the drudgery, poverty and risk of industrial working life. As a result, several chapels were built in the Pontmorlais area to house the town's rapidly growing congregations of non-conformists. The distance of these buildings from the traditional centre of worship at St Tydfil's Church may be intentional, as a symbol of their independence.

The potential for expansion of the town centre had resulted in development across the parish glebe land by 1806, joining the urban core and the new development at Pontmorlais with an area of planned streets including Castle Street and Glebeland Street. These formed a triangle to the west of the high street, whilst Castle Street continued further west to the famous iron bridge over the River Taff. The 1 inch to the mile Ordnance Survey map, published in 1814, shows this new area as densely developed with buildings extending southwards along the east side of the newly formed High Street.

By 1800 it had become clear that the Glamorganshire Canal was inadequate for the needs of exporting the produce of the ironworks and, as a result, a faster means of transporting goods was required. The Penydarren Tramroad extended the existing tramlines from Dowlais to the canal to follow a course along the east side of the Taff Valley. The tramway was the route used for the first steam powered locomotive to haul a load on rails, earning the engineer Richard Trevithick and the town a place in engineering history. It has effectively marked the eastern limit of the town centre since the early 19th century.

The remaining link in the town centre's development was the land to the west of the High Street. This was owned by William Thomas, owner of the Court Estate, who developed part of it as a market house in the mid 1830s. Streets surrounding the market hall and framing a market square to the east of it were set out at the same time (including Graham Street and Victoria Street). It appears that the development of land to the south, between Graham Street and Swan Street, was also well advanced by the mid-1830s.

The 1830s, '40s and '60s saw booms in railway building both in Britain and around the world, which resulted in phases of major growth in Merthyr Tydfil and its ironworks' communities. They also saw periods of terrible economic depression. Rapidly swelling populations and, occasionally, abundant wealth funded further chapel building, including the High Street Baptist Chapel (built 1840), or rebuilding and beautification of existing chapels and churches, including the Zoar Independent Chapel (rebuilt 1842). Concern over the rising dominance of non-conformism prompted the construction of a St David's Church in 1846-7 (providing a second Anglican church in the town centre).

The closure of the Penydarren Ironworks and sale of Penydarren Park, provided an opportunity for expansion of the town centre northwards from the 1880s. New housing and shops were built over the obsolete tramways. With the support of William Lewis (later Lord Merthyr) the community paid for the construction of a general hospital in 1888. Part of this land was also used to build the Theatre Royal in 1891.

Throughout the later 19th century the town centre became increasingly densely developed. Earlier buildings of two storeys were replaced by properties of three storeys, while changing fashions in architecture were adopted for new buildings or imposed on older ones through 'facade lifts'. Having established its commercial and spiritual dominance over the surrounding townships, the town centre also became the centre for the governance of this new entity with the creation of the Merthyr Tydfil Urban District Council in 1895. A new town hall with law courts was built in 1896 providing an ostentatious architectural expression of the town's new found corporate identity. Rebuilding of St Tydfil's Church shortly afterwards may be seen as another statement of late Victorian confidence and a desire to improve the image of the town.

Additions to the townscape during the early 20th century took advantage of opportunities for redevelopment and infilling such as the construction of the Morlais buildings at Pontmorlais in 1904, the former Water Board Offices in 1932 and the Public Library (funded by the Carnegie Foundation) in 1933-1936. The YMCA building (built 1911), the Labour Exchange, Masonic Temple and, later, the Merthyr Tydfil War Memorial (1931) were built on the southern edge of the former Penydarren Park Estate providing an architecturally northern edge to the town centre.

In the later 20th century the constraint of the town centre's dense development was overcome to an extent by clearance of areas of poor quality housing at China, Ynysgau and Caedraw, as well as the historic market house. These areas were redeveloped for high rise residential accommodation, a school, shopping precinct, bus station, offices and council buildings, which were designed to create an integrated community. As such they were relatively successful although the architecture used is of a style prevalent nationally in the post-war period and did not build on the distinctiveness of the town centre or form a coherent extension to it. A large open square was created in the 1960s by the demolition of many of the buildings of the early urban core in the south of the town centre (including structures on Lower High Street, Broad Street, Gillar Street and Court Street). This now forms an attractive southern entrance to the town centre.

4 SPATIAL ANALYSIS

4.1 Layout and street pattern

The town centre is focused on the single long and gently winding path of the High Street, which runs from St Tydfil's Church to Pontmorlais and up Penydarren Road to Gwaelodygarth, where the northern limit of the town centre is marked by the former Merthyr Tydfil General Hospital. Numerous small side streets lead off this spinal route, several of which were formerly longer but have been foreshortened as a result of later 20th century redevelopment on the edge of the town centre. Smaller alleyways provide access to yards or between side streets, which are often entered via passageways through the buildings.

The side streets are generally broad and straight, representing several planned developments onto previously undeveloped open land in the early and mid 19th century. A prominent triangle of broad streets formed by Glebeland Street, Castle Street and the High Street, are the most prominent indication of a phase of early 19th century planned development of the former glebe land. Further to the south, Graham Street, Victoria Street, and Market Square, represent the site of the former Market Hall and Square leading off the High Street, a prominent site in the economic, social and political life of 19th century Merthyr Tydfil.

John Street and Church Street, on the east side of High Street, both conform to the same characteristics as broad, straight side streets and also appear to represent development on to the glebe land. Newcastle Street is similarly broad, but has a pronounced bend. More minor side streets provide links between areas as well as creating small residential and craft working areas in their own right. Proberts Lane, for example, is a very narrow lane running eastwards from the High Street, with six small cottages facing onto the north side and the churchyard wall of Hope Church forming the south side. Mill Lane is another of these narrow lanes, running through a narrow gap in the building line to the west of the High Street and providing access to a small industrial yard known as Bowen's Court. These intimate backstreet and courtyard spaces provide small character areas that contrast with the larger scale buildings and spaces of the High Street.

To make the optimum use of development space, most buildings were constructed directly at the back of the pavement. The lack of intervening spaces helps to emphasise the commercial nature of the shops, banks and civic buildings. The buildings were constructed as informal terraces, abutting their neighbours and maximising the use of the commercial street frontage. Often this means that access to the rear of properties is provided by tunnels through the building line with upper floors suspended over. The widths of plots vary considerably, providing diversity and affecting the scale and general form of buildings. Most of the buildings have been extended backwards over associated yards leaving little additional land surrounding them. The Zoar Chapel, St Tydfil's Church and the former Drill Hall on Pontmorlais West are unusual in having a notable amount of open space associated with them.

Important public buildings and places of worship were built with some space between them and the pavement to provide separation from the busy street. This was normally marked off with railings surrounding a grassed yard, a raised terrace (as at the High Street Baptist Chapel), or even a basement area as seen at the Town Hall. These buildings are mostly detached, if only separated from their neighbours by a few feet, to emphasise their status and separateness from the commercial area surrounding them. Large street corner plots provided prominent locations for particularly ostentatious commercial buildings.

4.2 Open spaces and trees

There are a number of very varied open spaces in the conservation area, mainly linked by the High Street. These are:

- Lower High Street Square;
- St Tydfil's Church Churchyard;
- Public garden in Pontmorlais;
- Space around the War Memorial in Pontmorlais;
- Space next to the Theatre Royal, Pontmorlais.

Lower High Street Square;

The public square at the southern entrance to the High Street, next to St Tydfil's Churchyard (Lower High Street Square) forms an important public open space, defining the southern limit of the modern commercial area of the town centre. It provides a transitional space between the High Street and the church that is important in maintaining the dignity of services held in the latter. Recent works to regenerate the High Street involved considerable investment in the public realm in this area. This included the renovation of the ornamental cover of the fountain, which forms the square's centrepiece, as well as repaving, and provision of attractive planting, benches, bollards and a number of raised areas that create alternative viewing positions around the space.

St Tydfil's Church Churchyard;

St Tydfil's churchyard provides a quiet, green space surrounded by mature broad leaved trees, creating an area for quiet reflection and an attractive setting for the listed church.

Public garden in Pontmorlais;

A small public garden has been created at the northern end of High Street, Pontmorlais. This provides an attractive transition between Penydarren and Pontmorlais West, which are dominated by busy traffic, and High Street, Pontmorlais, which is a traditional shopping area. The space is not particularly historic but does provide an attractive area at the northern end of the High Street, which also has interesting views of the listed former YMCA building, the locally listed Morlais Tavern and Imperial Hotel and an industrial building across the Morlais Stream occupied by Merthyr Upholstery.

Space around the War Memorial in Pontmorlais;

The area around the War Memorial on the north side of Pontmorlais, should provide another important public open space but is currently disconnected from the wider townscape as a result of the derelict buildings and land surrounding it. The area has also become associated with anti-social activities and the grass is often covered with broken glass. The statues that form part of the War Memorial were removed for safe keeping as a result of the threat of repeated vandalism. It is possible that this area might be brought back into more beneficial use by improving accessibility, perhaps as part of a route between Park Terrace and Penydarren Road, as well as promoting greater use of the surrounding spaces.

Space next to the Theatre Royal, Pontmorlais.

Another small public square has been created next to the former Theatre Royal and Thespian house (both listed buildings). The Trevithick Memorial, which comprises a scale replica of the locomotive engine used on the historic first steam powered journey on the Penydarren Tramway, forms the centrepiece of the square.

Whilst all the streets within the conservation area are important public spaces, the pedestrianisation of the High Street to the south of Church Street has created a large open shopping esplanade that is contiguous with the shopping precinct to the west and forms an attractive public area. This area has received considerable investment in the public realm over the last two years, including provision of new granite paving, benches, litter bins and traffic control bollards.

Small spaces outside the Library and St David's Church provide further public open spaces, both of which contain important civic monuments.

4.3 Focal points, focal buildings, views and vistas

Focal points

Some locations gain particular prominence where several views converge. These points are often found at important road junctions and gain further value as a result of the large numbers of pedestrians and drivers which use them. As a result of their focal value these sites have often become the locations for important public buildings or structures of particular architectural interest.

The entrance to the High Street from the public square next to St Tydfil's Church, including a large part of the square, forms the first of a series of focal points which can be found in the High Street. The importance of this particular focal point is that it marks the entrance to the High Street, as at this point the street becomes enclosed by buildings, some of which are of note, including No. 149 High Street, an historic building which retains attractive mouldings around its windows and an elegant curved shopfront. This building and other buildings facing it on Three Salmon Street have all benefitted from a sensitive restoration scheme which has done much to preserve their architectural and historic interest.

Just to the north, the junction of High Street with Swan Street and Masonic Lane creates another focal point, to which No. 31 High Street (Chaplin's Cafe Bar), Nos. 143 and 143b High Street and the former Log Cabin Public House provide definition. These buildings preserve important architectural detailing which was designed to increase their visibility in this prominent location. This location also marks the northern limit of the late 19th century town centre, which was focused in the southern part of the conservation area.

The junction of High Street with Glebeland Street creates the next focal point, which is made particularly conspicuous by another important building, No. 119 High Street, which is crowned by a notable cupola. The ground floor elevation of the Belle Vue Public House adds equally to the importance of this location by its fine late 19th century ground floor facade of painted brick, moulded stucco and Bath stone.

The junction of High Street and Castle Street is given a similar focal status by the presence of the Town Hall, which forms an impressive stop to views down Castle Street. The Town Hall's clock tower also acts as a landmark in views from a considerable distance surrounding the town centre. Where High Street narrows, a change in character is created to the quieter, specialist shopping area, which becomes more active in the evenings with the opening of the many takeaways in this area.

The junction of Penydarren Road/Pontmorlais West with High Street, Pontmorlais has been described above, with regard to the small public garden that has been created at this point. The recent renovation of Nos. 20 – 22 High Street, Pontmorlais (Bob Wilding Motorcycles), which incorporated a striking red colour scheme, has also made an important contribution to the vibrancy of this space.

The entrance to the town centre from the north east is marked by the sharp bend in Penydarren Road at its junction with Alexandra Road. The imposing structures of the former

Merthyr Tydfil Nursing Home and several large Victorian villas in the immediate vicinity add to the sense of arrival at this point.

Focal buildings

The Town Hall and No. 119 High Street provide the two most significant focal buildings in the conservation area. Other prominent buildings include:

- The former YMCA, Pontmorlais West;
- Nos. 22 – 22 High Street (Bob Wilding Motorcycle), Pontmorlais;
- Nos. 1 – 6 Morlais Buildings, High Street, Pontmorlais;
- Carnegie Library, High Street;
- No. 62 High Street (Macdonald's, formerly the New Inn);
- Social Services Offices (former Water Board Offices), Castle Street;
- No. 49 High Street (Brynmor Williams Butchers);
- Nos. 39 and 40 High Street (The Art Cafe and Schuz);
- No. 31 High Street (Chaplin's Bar Cafe);
- The Crown Inn, No. 28 High Street;
- St Tydfil's Church, High Street; and
- The Court, Court Road.

Views

Views within the conservation area benefit from the survival of the town's historic street plan and the dense building pattern. As mentioned above, the prominence of buildings of particular historic importance or architectural interest at the intersections of historic streets provides attractive and interesting end stops to views through the conservation area. Several of these buildings also provide landmarks in views from outside the conservation area. Views which rate as particularly important are marked on the Townscape Appraisal Map and include:

- The view north along High Street to the junction with Glebeland Street including No. 119 High Street;
- The view into High Street and Three Salmon Street from the Lower High Street Square;
- The view north to St Tydfil's Church from Lower High Street;
- The view south along High Street, Pontmorlais to the Imperial Hotel and Nos. 1 – 6 Morlais Buildings;
- The view north east along Castle Street to the Town Hall (this view can be appreciated from as far away as the car park for Merthyr Tydfil College on the west side of the River Taff);
- The view south to the Town Hall and Hope Church from High Street, Pontmorlais;
- Vista southwards from Lower High Street framed by the Merthyr Common and Mynydd Cilfach-yr-encil to the south east and Mynydd Gethin to the south west;

- Vistas west and south west from Castle Street and Swan Street to Mynydd Aberdar and Mynydd Gethin including the historic iron and coal extraction landscape above Heolgerrig.

4.4 Boundaries

The majority of property boundaries within the town centre are defined by buildings. In back yard areas, boundaries are often defined by walls, usually about one and a half to two metres high, which are built from limestone and sandstone rubble. The rear walls of properties seen from Tramroadside North and Wheatsheaf Lane (next to Merthyr Tydfil Bus Station) are constructed in this way. These rubble walls are complemented by walls of better quality construction and built of rock faced sandstone, such as the retaining walls on the north side of Penydarren Road, which are laid as 'snecked' masonry in courses of variably-sized stone.

A small number of brick boundary walls are visible, including the wall enclosing the public garden at the north end of High Street, Pontmorlais and the car park facing it.

Several of the prestigious public and religious buildings have boundaries made from wrought iron railings with ornate designs, supported by dwarf walls and piers of materials which have been chosen to complement the building. These buildings include the Town Hall and St Tydfil's churchyard, where the railings, gates, walls and piers have been listed separately in recognition of their important contribution to the setting of the church.

4.5 Public realm

Street Lighting

Street lighting in the town centre is provided by a variety of modern products as a result of several schemes of public realm works. In Chapel Street, Victoria Street and Glebeland Street, black Victorian-style gas lamps, provided with electric lamps, are supported on a cast metal column which is decorated with an acanthus leaf motif on its base. Along High Street, Pontmorlais and outside Merthyr Tydfil Bus Station (outside the conservation area), black painted columns with a traditional collared base support a drop-shaped lamp under a circular shade. In High Street, between Church Street and the lower High Street square, modern steel lamps with integral brackets have been attached to building frontages, avoiding the street clutter created by additional lighting columns.

The lower High Street square and the adjacent car park are lit with a mixture of reproduction Victorian-style 'gas' lamps and a very modern steel lighting column supporting a dome-shaped lamp. The latter were recently introduced as part of the wider scheme of public realm improvements.

Unpainted or green painted steel lighting columns with angled heads supporting a low sodium pressure lamp in a plain grey housing are found on High Street between Castle Street and Church Street, and along Penydarren Road and Pontmorlais West.

Paving

Only a small number of areas of historic paving have survived in the town centre. These include riven stone flags on Proberts Lane, which, sadly, have become interspersed by patches of black tarmac where repair works have been undertaken to a low standard. Mill Lane retains historic cobbled paving in the narrow passage running through the building line.

A scheme of public realm works in the north of the town centre has provided sawn York stone paving slabs running from the Town Hall to the northern end of High Street,

Pontmorlais, and extending up Newcastle Street to the junction with Tramroadside north. The imposition of a one-way system through this area has allowed provision of the wide pavements with parking bays.

A second scheme of public realm works has provided another modern paving treatment of grey and alternating coloured panels in granite, which extends from the Public Library southwards to the Lower High Street Square. The finished effect of this scheme is to provide each property in the pedestrianised section of the High Street, including Graham Street and Market Square, with a 'door mat' of granite distinguished from its neighbour's by a change in colour. This provides a very modern floorscape, with a high standard of design and quality of finish that also emphasises the contributions of the historic buildings to the streetscape. Where vehicle access is provided through this area the carriage way is surfaced with grey granite, matching the surrounding pavements. Elsewhere in the town centre road surfaces are covered with black tarmac or tarmac containing green or red granite chips.

Later 20th century brick paving has been laid on Glebeland Street and Castle Street. This provides a red surface of small unit size that is complimentary to the materials of surrounding buildings on Glebeland Street and reflects the lower position of this street in the hierarchy of High Street, side streets, lanes and passages. It looks somewhat incongruous amidst the larger and predominantly modern buildings on Castle Street in the approach to the Town Hall.

Street Furniture

A number of very impressive new benches of red granite with inlaid quotations about the history of Merthyr Tydfil have been provided as part of the recent programme of public realm improvements in the High Street, which provide useful opportunities to rest and converse. Less dominant benches with wooden lathes on steel or cast iron frames are provided in the Lower High Street Square, in the small open space outside the Public Library, and in the public garden at the north end of High Street, Pontmorlais.

A cast metal bench in a very original folded sheet design with impressed decoration of leaves also forms part of the public realm improvements in the Lower High Street Square. A row of bespoke metal railings and bollards runs along the raised viewing terrace to the rear of this bench.

A single mid- 20th century Royal Mail pillar box at the junction of High Street and Newcastle Street, has been listed and adds interest to the streetscape outside the Town Hall.

Two rows of three concrete bollards in an unusual Art-Deco design stand in the pavement outside the Social Services offices on Castle Street and are contemporary with it (c. 1932).

5 THE BUILDINGS OF THE CONSERVATION AREA

5.1 Building types

The evolution of the town centre from a small village into a busy town centre serving a sprawling urban district, which attained an administrative function late in its history, is well represented by the types of buildings preserved within the conservation area.

The Court, currently occupied by Merthyr Tydfil's Labour Club, is the oldest surviving building in the town, believed to retain masonry from a structure built in the 12th century, but rebuilt in the 16th century. A further period of construction and remodelling in the later 17th and 19th centuries, and a large modern extension to the south west forming part of the Labour Club, have subsequently followed. The older part of the building has a typical Jacobean appearance with a steeply pitched roof and large dormers extending the accommodation into the roof space. The gable ends of the roof and dormers have parapets, which are carried out from the eaves on large stone kneelers. This is the only building in the conservation area that can confidently be identified as having formed part of the pre-industrial village.

The early development of the village into a commercial centre for the wider district included the building of many inns, as well as shops, housing and workshops. The Crown Inn, built in 1785, is the best surviving example of one of the town's early inns and forms a centrepiece to the short section of High Street between Swan Street and the Lower High Street Square. It is a low building of two storeys, constructed with its long side to the road, reflecting the availability of space for development in the town centre at this point in time. Other inns built by the early 19th century inns in the town centre, which reflect the same style of development are located on High Street, Pontmorlais and include the former Vulcan Inn, the former Ye Olde Express and The Anchor. Other buildings may be of similar date

The expansion of the town across the glebe land appears to have represented a planned phase of development which began in the early 19th century with development increasing in density throughout the century. Commercial buildings were focused around the new Market House and Square on the west side of High Street. Competition for space in this area is demonstrated by the narrow widths of the plots and by the increased height of buildings from two to three storeys. Shops built on the north side of Victoria Street, between Graham Street and the High Street Baptist Chapel, reflect the Classical style of the late Regency period with simple, symmetrical facades, framed by rusticated quoins and divided by string courses between floors. They are lit with tall, narrow sash windows whilst the roofs are hidden by parapets with simple moulded corncicing. Changing tastes in architecture are reflected in other buildings by the adoption of more heavily detailed frontages with Victorian Gothic revival influences. Features include oriel windows at first floor level, exposed pitched roofs, prominent dormer windows and moulded ridge tiles. The facades are clad with a mixture of materials which add to the complexity of their designs. Many of these buildings were new or remodelled public houses competing for the trade of wealthier workers during times of economic prosperity.

Chapels were also built in the 19th century by the many congregations which were developing in the town. During the successive boom periods for iron production in the 1830s, 1840s and 1860s the population increased significantly, requiring the expansion of the chapels and providing money to be invested in their fabric. Of the 23 listed buildings in the town centre, six were constructed between the 1840s and 1860s, all of which are either places of worship or associated structures. The importance of these structures to the communities associated with them is reflected in the high financial investment in their architectural quality, materials and design.

The growth of the town's role as the administrative centre of the district, in addition to being its commercial and spiritual heart, was reflected in the construction of a number of important

public buildings starting with the Poor Law Union Workhouse, built just to the east of the town centre in the 1860s. Soon afterwards, in 1888, the Merthyr General Hospital was built at the northern entrance to the town centre. The building, which has since become the Merthyr Tydfil Nursing Home and is now unoccupied, was built in the emerging Baroque Revival style, making extensive use of moulded terracotta features to provide lavish decoration. The Town Hall, with the County Law Courts to the rear, was built in 1896 (also in the Baroque style) and reflects the confidence of the town as a prospering area at the end of the 19th century. Other buildings that reflect the growing administrative functions include the late 19th century Gas Company Offices at the junction of High Street and Swan Street (more Baroque detailing) and the Water Board Offices on Castle Street (built in 1932), which show Art-Deco influences. The Public Library (or Carnegie Library), built in 1933 - 1936, is the latest of these buildings.

Areas of middle class housing were also beginning to develop to the north of Merthyr Tydfil at the end of the 19th century, including large villas such as Oaklands, Thorneycroft, Hazeldene and Garth Villas on Penydarren Road, whilst more modest workers' housing was beginning to be constructed in the space in between. This development was assisted by the gradual decline of the Penydarren Ironworks and the sale of Penydarren Park, which opened up spaces for new development.

Merthyr's 'coming of age' at the end of the 19th century onwards is represented by the start of a trend continued into the 20th century for creating memorials to the heroes of its past. The fountain cover provided by W L Lewis (Baron Merthyr) in the 1890s, which forms the centrepiece of the Lower High Street Square, commemorates his grandparents, Robert and Lucy Thomas of Waunwyllt, who were influential in the development of the steam coal trade. Merthyr Tydfil's War Memorial, completed in 1931, featured figures by L. S. Merrifield of a collier and a female carrying a child, representing the working people of Merthyr, as well as more martial symbols. The rebuilding of St Tydfil's Church, removing all trace of the small medieval church that preceded it, should also be seen as a part of the endeavour to enhance Merthyr Tydfil's role as the civic and spiritual heart of the district. Other statues of notable figures stand outside the Public Library and St. Tydfil's Hospital, just to the east of the conservation area.

Having established its position in the 19th century, the town centre continued to function as the central commercial area of the district throughout the 20th century as well. The maturity of the town centre was reflected in the construction of more lavish buildings, such as Classical-style banks and Baroque shopping parades and hotels, which reflect confidence in the area's economy. The social function of the town centre is also represented in the construction of places of entertainment such as the Royal Theatre, Penydarren Road, and the Palace Cinema, Castle Street.

Redevelopment in the later 20th century continued to provide a renewal of the commercial buildings, although the new civic buildings were built outside the traditional High Street area. A lack of any new religious buildings reflected society's growing secularism, and now several former places of worship are either disused, or have been converted for other uses.

5.2 Listed buildings

A total of 23 buildings within the conservation area have been designated as Buildings and Structures of Special Architectural or Historical Interest (or Listed Buildings) under the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990. These are all listed Grade II.

Religious or Previously Ecclesiastical

- St Tydfil's Church, High Street
- Gates and Railings at St Tydfil's Churchyard, High Street

- Zoar Chapel (Welsh Congregational Chapel), High Street, Pontmorlais
- Gates and Gate Piers at Entry to Zoar Chapel, High Street, Pontmorlais
- High Street Baptist Chapel
- St David's Church, High Street
- Memorial Fountain in St David's Churchyard Wall, High Street
- Former Wesley Methodist Church, High Street, Pontmorlais

Historic Houses and Inns

- Court House, Court Road
- Crown Inn, High Street

Public Buildings and Structures

- Town Hall, High Street
- Pillar Box at north east corner of Town Hall, High Street
- Ironwork Fountain Canopy, High Street
- District Education Office of Mid-Glamorgan County Council, Pontmorlais West (formerly the YMCA)
- Carnegie Library, High Street
- Statute and Plinth to Henry Seymour Berry, High Street
- Merthyr Tydfil War Memorial, Pontmorlais
- Guard Rails and Steps at Merthyr Tydfil War Memorial, Pontmorlais

Miscellaneous

- No. 47 High Street (Barclay's Bank)
- No. 69 High Street (Lloyd's Bank)
- No. 49 – 50 (Flocks) High Street, Pontmorlais
- Theatre Royal, Penydarren Road
- Thespian House at the Theatre Royal, Penydarren Road

5.3 Locally listed buildings

'Locally Listed' buildings are buildings which are of local rather than national interest, perhaps due to their connection with local people or particular historical events, or because they demonstrate the use of local materials or details. A total of 19 buildings and structures, as well as a number of street facades in the conservation area have been locally listed:

Industrial Archaeology

- Penydarren Tramroad;
- All Remaining Railway Lines.

Prominent Buildings

- Masonic Hall, Pontmorlais;
- Former Employment Exchange, Pontmorlais; and
- Post Office, John Street.

Public Houses & Inns

- Glove and Shears, (currently Domino's Pizza) Court Road;
- Ex-Servicemen's Club, Lower High Street (Boxing Club);
- King's Arms, High Street (No. 57, currently Gregg's Bakery);
- Great Western, High Street (No. 58, currently Ethel Austen);
- Former Vulcan and Friendship Inn, No. 90 High Street;
- Imperial Hotel, No. 74, High Street, Pontmorlais;
- Morlais Inn, No. 73 High Street, Pontmorlais;
- Ye Olde Express(Orient Express), High Street, Pontmorlais;
- New Inn, High Street (No. 62, currently Macdonald's)
- Belle Vue, Glebeland Street;
- Former Red Cow, Glebeland Street;
- Former Narrow Gauge, Glebeland Street;
- Wyndham Arms, Glebeland Street.

Street Facades, Town Centre

- Nos. 49-50/Morlais Buildings, High Street (E), Pontmorlais;
- Nos. 1 – 7 High Street, Pontmorlais;
- 82 – 96 High Street, Lloyd's Bank to No.1 John Street;
- Nos. 52 - 62 High Street (east side) including John Street frontage of No. 62;
- West side of High Street, 104 – 119, 120 – 122, 126, 129 – 135, 143 – 149;
- North side of Glebeland Street, Nos. 56 – 57;
- South side of Glebeland Street, Nos. 1 – 5.

Residential

- Bowens Court.

5.4 Positive buildings

In addition to the Listed and Locally Listed buildings, a further number of unlisted buildings have been identified on the Designations Map as being *positive* buildings of townscape merit. Buildings identified as being *positive* will vary, but commonly they will be good examples of relatively unaltered historic buildings where their style, detailing and building materials provides the streetscape with interest and variety. Most importantly, they make a *positive* contribution to the special interest of the conservation area. Where a building has been heavily altered, and restoration would be impractical, they are excluded. In Merthyr Town Centre most of these buildings conform to the patterns seen in the listed and locally listed buildings representing commercial properties, current or former religious buildings, or civic buildings. However, they also include a small number of residential properties of mid and late 19th century origin, which contribute to the consistency of scale, materials and style in the streetscape.

These are too numerous to name individually, but they are marked on the Townscape Appraisal Map.

5.5 Building styles, materials and colours

As described above, the building style and materials of the town centre strongly reflect the date and function of each building, as well as their position in the town. The local sandstone

was not well suited to the neo-Classical architecture favoured in the late 18th and early 19th century and, as a result, cement render was favoured as a covering for the publicly visible elevations of buildings. In some cases this was incised with lines to represent fine ashlar masonry. Where finer stone was too expensive to import, architectural details, such as mouldings surrounding windows and doors, or string courses, quoins and cornices of pediments, were all formed in render. Areas of uncoursed rubble masonry, some painted, can be seen to the sides and rear of many of these buildings. Render is most frequently painted cream or magnolia although other colours (some in very vibrant tones) do occur. More traditional rusticated render to ground floors was previously better represented, although good examples survive at the Orient Express and the Former English Wesleyan Chapel, both on High Street Pontmorlais and No. 4 Glebeland Street.

The development of a brick works at Thomas Town from the late 1830s would have supplied a more readily useable building material for the tall, narrow buildings being constructed in the town centre. The brick is generally of a light orangey red colour, although buff and yellow coated brick are seen, used for detailing on surrounds of opening and chimneys. Brick was often combined with other, more prestigious materials to create detailed frontages, such as that of the Bell Vue Inn on Glebeland Street, which combines brick, cream painted render and Bath stone, as well as blue painted brick.

The introductions of both Gothic Revival and Baroque styles in the late 19th century ensured a greater use of red brick with the addition of moulded terracotta detailing, including preformed mouldings for openings, pilasters, capitals and consoles, statuary and ornamental friezes. The Town Hall provides the most exuberant example of this style. Other buildings, including No. 119 High Street, use a more varied palette, combining red brick and terracotta with stone and moulded render, arched stone hoods to doorcases, and intricate carved stone plaques or cornices on parapets.

The shape of window openings varies considerably within the town centre, adding to the diversity and interest of the facades. The majority of early and mid 19th century buildings have rectangular openings, which form an important element of their simple, symmetrical designs, whilst in the later buildings, a trend is seen for more elaborate arched openings, such as the arcades at No. 1 Morlais Buildings, High Street, Pontmorlais. Another variation are the Gothic features which can be seen on the projecting oriel windows at No. 4 Glebeland Street and No. 49 High Street.

The survival of traditional timber framed sash windows on many of the buildings throughout the town centres adds considerably to the positive contribution of buildings, listed and unlisted, to the character and appearance of the conservation area. Many of these are of unusual designs such as the arch-headed sash windows at the Imperial Hotel, High Street, Pontmorlais and the seven-over-one pane windows at No. 6 Glebeland Street. Nos. 39 and 40 High Street stand out as buildings of interest largely as a result of the highly complex and unusual joinery to the first and second floor sash windows.

The highly visible use of timber detailing is another feature which is seen in some of the later 19th century buildings, such as the former Merthyr Tydfil Gas Company Offices at Nos. 149 and 149b High Street, which are given robust Baroque detailing through the use of thick timber bargeboards and brackets to the eaves of the gables which project out towards the road. Exposed timber frame detailing on some frontages is also seen as an expression of the Gothic and Tudor Revival in the late 19th century.

Roofs are normally pitched, and covered with Welsh slates. Later 19th century buildings are distinguished by the use of ornamental clay ridge tiles and terracotta finials, many of which survive. The presentation of gable ends to the street frontage with extravagant Baroque, Classical or Gothic Revival details, is a particularly distinctive feature of the town centre. Nos. 1 – 6 Morlais Buildings, High Street, Pontmorlais, and Nos. 104 and 115 High Street provide good example of Baroque gables, whilst examples of intricately carved fretwork

Gothic Revival or Arts and Crafts frontages are preserved at Nos. 57 and 113 High Street and No. 4 Glebeland Street.

5.6 Shopfronts

Shopfronts make an important contribution to the character and appearance of the conservation area, forming an important element of the Classical, Baroque and Gothic architecture. Elements include stall risers, recessed doorways, timber fascias, engaged pilasters with consoles or scrolled brackets supporting cornices. Upper floors form an important element of these shopfronts. Some provide the best preserved elements, including traditional timber framed sash windows, curved projecting or moulded hoods, parapets with moulded cornice details, rusticated quoins, projecting (Oriel) bay windows.

Particularly good examples:

- No. 1 High Street (Chaplin's Cafe);
- Nos. 39 – 48 High Street;
- No. 49 High Street (Brynmor Williams Butchers);
- Nos. 83 – 86 High Street, Pontmorlais;
- Nos. 1 – 2 High Street (Orient Express), Pontmorlais;
- Nos. 1 – 6 Morlais Buildings with Nos. 74 – 76 High Street, Pontmorlais;
- No. 62 High Street (Macdonald's);
- Nos. 34-36 High Street (first floor only);
- Bob Wilding Motorcycles, High Street, Pontmorlais;
- No. 97 High Street (Hairport);
- 113 – 115 High Street (above ground floor);
- 117 – 119 High Street with 56 and 57 Glebeland Street;
- No. 122 High Street (Natwest Bank), formerly Sandbrook's Ironmongery;
- No. 143 – 143b High Street; and
- Nos. 148 – 149 High Street.

6 CHARACTER AREAS

6.1 Introduction to the Character Areas

There are four Character Areas in the conservation area, based on historical development, uses, building types, and spatial qualities. Inevitably some areas are less well defined than others and contain sub-areas that vary in some way. These Character Areas are defined below, along with a summary of their principal features and their historical development. A summary of the key issues is also provided which leads into the Issues as set out in Chapter 7.

The Character Areas are:

1. Lower High Street Square and southern entrance to the Town Centre
2. High Street Commercial Area
3. Pontmorlais High Street Commercial Area
4. Penydarren Road and Pontmorlais West

6.2 Lower High Street Square and southern entrance to the Town Centre

This area is focused around the twin public open spaces of St Tydfil's churchyard and the Lower High Street Square, which are located in the south of the town centre. It encompasses the area of the pre-industrial village of Merthyr Tydfil, although much of this was cleared in the 1960s. The area is divided by the former Vale of Neath/GWR railway line, which runs from north to south with the railway station to the north of the character area. Key features of the area include:

- Well designed and maintained public open spaces creating a gateway to the town centre and providing attractive settings for a number of listed and unlisted historic buildings;
- Buildings illustrating the early development of the town from a village to a thriving industrial area in the late 18th and early 19th century, including The Court and The Crown Inn (both listed Grade II) and Nos. 1 and 2 Three Salmon Street;
- The short section of the High Street running up to Swan Street has an intimate feel, which is created by a strong sense of enclosure. Tall buildings form gateways at either end of the street with lower buildings with relatively long frontages in the intervening space;
- A sense of arrival at the town centre is created by the funnel-like space of Lower High Street;
- The large scale and robust Romanesque architecture of St Tydfil's Church provides a dominating landmark at the entrance to the town centre from the south west, as well as marking the heart of the historic village;
- Views from the Lower High Street Square and Lower High Street include attractive vistas southwards along the Taff Valley.
- The area is divided by the railway embankment, which provides a surviving element of Merthyr Tydfil's Victorian railway station.

- A carriage arch on the west side of High Street provides access to a small yard area with buildings representing the type of opportunistic 18th and 19th century development that characterised most of this area until the later 20th century.

Negative features and issues

A number of features were identified as detracting from the character and appearance of this area, or otherwise having a negative impact on its historic environment. These include:

- The railway embankment has a large area covered with growths of invasive weed species, particularly buddleia, which create an untidy margin to an area that has otherwise received considerable public investment. A second buddleia was noted to the rear of the Crown Inn (a Grade II listed building);
- Modern buildings of unsympathetic design and materials, as well as some poorly maintained areas, intrude into views across Lower High Street Square. These include the Farm Foods shop and a small undertakers' yard, both located on the south side of Court Road, and the St Tydfil's Court and Morlais Court directly to the south of St Tydfil's Church;
- The modern extension to The Court is of unsympathetic design and materials and detracts from the appearance of the listed building;
- Despite recent investment in both buildings and public realm the area currently contains a number of vacant shop units.

6.3 High Street Commercial area

This area forms the main body of the town centre's historic commercial and civic area, which was developed from lands of the Court House Estate and the parish's glebe land in the early and mid 19th century. Key features of this area include:

- The presence of numerous civic, religious and commercial buildings of historic and architectural interest, which include many listed and locally listed buildings and facades. These represent the public and private investment associated with the development of this area as the commercial, religious and civic centre of the first major industrial town in Wales in the late 18th and 19th centuries;
- A busy shopping area including numerous locally owned businesses, which benefits from recent investment in improvements to paving, seating and lighting;
- A broad central street (the High Street) provides a clear principal axis with a consistent sense of enclosure created by the dense urban development, which is of a unified 2 to 3 storey scale. The frontages include many attractive historic buildings including tall, narrow-fronted properties and striking corner buildings. These create a highly distinctive townscape;
- Broad side streets lead off the central route with further striking historic building frontages and attractive views out to mountainous surroundings;
- Landmark buildings including the Town Hall, listed banks and the High Street Baptist Chapel and key shop fronts punctuate the street frontages, creating many points of interest along the High Street's route and within the more intimate side street areas;
- Pedestrianisation of a large part of this area has created a space in which the townscape can be enjoyed without interference from passing traffic; and

- A modern and interestingly designed Railway Station stands to the east of the High Street.

Negative Features and Issues

- The very poor condition and lack of reuse of the former Town Hall may result in the loss of this highly significant building. This should be the focus of town centre's streetscape but it has become dilapidated through the lack of use and appropriate maintenance.
- Growths of self seeded buddleia are seen on the principle frontages of the many buildings in this area. A particularly well established example is located on the façade of Peacocks at No. 37 High Street. If not treated these growths will soon result in significant damage to the buildings, whilst their presence adds to a general appearance of poor maintenance and suggests a lack of economic vitality. However, many of them are on inaccessible areas at first and second floor level, which may require specialist equipment to treat them;
- Many commercial premises appear to have vacant upper floors. The lack of use of these spaces represents a failure to exploit the value of the building stock and is likely to result in the deterioration of buildings through a general lack of the appropriate maintenance;
- A number of buildings constructed in the later 20th century were built with materials and designs that are not sympathetic to the character and appearance of the wider area and should be viewed as opportunities for enhancement. These include:
 - The Castle Hotel, Castle Street and Glebeland Street (just outside the conservation area)
 - The St Tydfil Shopping Precinct
 - The Merthyr Tydfil Bus Station
 - No. 37 High Street
 - Nos. 41 – 45 High Street
 - No. 59 High Street
 - Nos. 67 and 68 High Street
 - Nos. 135 – 139 High Street
- Many buildings in this area have lost details of historic shopfronts, which have been replaced with modern aluminium or uPVC frontages with overly dominating fascias, that are functional but of poor design and represent a loss of the area's historic character and appearance.

6.4 High Street, Pontmorlais

This area contains a ribbon of development following the route of a northern section of the High Street up to the crossing of the Morlais stream. It appears that this area developed before the main High Street to the south, being outside the Parish Glebeland. Although once just as vibrant as the High Street area to the south, this is now a quieter area during the day time, with specialist shops. At night it becomes more vibrant with the opening of numerous hot food takeaways. Key features of this area include:

- High Street Pontmorlais follows a sinuous central route with a strong sense of enclosure from the dense development surrounding it. The curving street line provides continually changing views along the frontages;

- Numerous tall, narrow fronted properties provide a strong vertical rhythm to frontages in this area. This is, in part the result of groups of properties forming single developments, including Nos. 1-6 Morlais Buildings, The Imperial Hotel and Nos. 16 – 22 High Street, Pontmorlais, although it is also a result of the use of bright paint colours, dividing the frontages into individual properties;
- Several small side streets and courtyards have narrow opening off the central corridor, which reinforce the High Street's sense of enclosure and create intimate areas just outside the main path. Buildings within this area are generally more modest than those on the street frontage and including workshops and other smaller buildings which were once used for local industries. The Zoar Chapel, hidden behind the western High Street frontage along one of these narrow lanes, is a building of special architectural and historic interest.
- A variation in the public realm from the area to the south creates a feeling of change between the two areas. The materials used here have a more traditional character;
- The course of the historic Penydarren Tramroad (Tramroadside North) provides a quiet and secluded back street running along the eastern edge of this area;
- The small public garden at the northern end of this area is enclosed by walls and railings and reflects the quiet, more tranquil character of this part of Merthyr Tydfil, as opposed to the busier and more public areas to the south;
- A number of buildings, such as the Orient Express, the Former Vulcan and Friendship Inn, the Anchor Public House and No. 88 High Street (the Communities First office) represent survivals of the earliest stages of the area's urban development. Unsurprisingly they are still, or have been, inns.
- Many of the buildings are in residential uses, with small areas of housing, such as Proberts Lane, and greater use of the space over existing shops;
- Many buildings in this area preserve all or elements of their historic shopfronts, which make an important contribution to its historic character and appearance.

Negative Features and Issues

- This area lacks the economic vitality of the High Street area to the south and, as a result, a number of small businesses are under considerable pressure. This is the result of several of factors, which include the lack of space in the adjacent car parks and the dominance of hot food takeaways in this area. Most of these remain closed during daylight business hours, creating inactive frontages, masked by steel shutters. This has depleted the attraction for shoppers to this area during the daytime although it is a busy area in the evenings;
- The Morlais Castle Public House is a key building for this area, standing near its northern entrance. Unfortunately it has been unoccupied for a long time with the result that it is showing evidence of decay through a lack of use and maintenance. As such it currently has a negative impact on the character and appearance of the area, although this could be remedied through appropriate restoration. The deteriorating condition of the building may become a series issue for surrounding properties;
- The poor condition of the former Palace Cinema, which stands at the southern entrance to this character area, detracts significantly from its character and appearance. It also has a negative impact on the settings of nearby listed buildings. The structure relates poorly to the scale and massing of surrounding structures, such as the well preserved shop front of no. 97 High Street, and currently creates a large inactive frontage at a key position for both High Street and Castle Street;

- Many buildings in this area have partially or totally lost their historic shopfronts, resulting in a gradual loss of its distinctive character and appearance;
- The former English Wesleyan Methodist Chapel is currently vacant;
- Several other buildings standing behind the street frontages are also vacant and derelict, and may soon deteriorate to the point where repair becomes unviable. Of particular note are the stables to the rear of the Imperial Hotel and the workshop in Bowens Court, Mill Lane;
- Castle Street and Castle Yard, which lie to the west of High Street, Pontmorlais, provide an important access route between public car parks and the town centre. Both streets have been adversely affected by the construction of poorly designed buildings or extensions.

6.5 Penydarren Road and Pontmorlais West

This area contains the former route of the tramroad that connected the Dowlais and Penydarren Ironworks to the Glamorganshire Canal. The Penydarren Ironworks ceased production in 1859 but was reused intermittently until 1889. The associated iron master's house at Penydarren Park and its grounds were redeveloped in the late 19th century, allowing the construction of a number of the town's most prominent civic buildings. The area also provides a link to more residential areas to the north and, following the removal of the obsolete tramway, was developed for housing, including a number of grand villas, as well as more modest cottages and shops. Characteristic features of this area include:

- Penydarren Road and Pontmorlais West follow a sinuous path representing the course of the historic tramway along a gentle incline from north east to south west. The road is split on two levels, representing elements of the tramway's engineering;
- A sharp bend in the road in the north east is surrounded by prominent late 19th century buildings including the former Merthyr Tydfil General Hospital and a group of large villas, creating a gateway to the conservation area from the north east;
- The views south eastwards down Penydarren Road take in the imposing structures of the Theatre Royal and the former YMCA building, with an attractive background of the mountainous countryside;
- Terraced housing on the south side of Penydarren Road and Pontmorlais West and the stone retaining walls of the terraces on the north side of the road provide a good sense of enclosure to the streetscene;
- A group of significant civic and social buildings, including the former YMCA, the Merthyr Tydfil War Memorial, The Masonic Temple and the former Labour Exchange, all overlook the junction of High Street Pontmorlais, Penydarren Road and Pontmorlais West, providing a strong sense of civic space at the northern entrance to the High Street, Pontmorlais area;
- Trees and shrubs in the gardens of properties surrounding this area, and on the hillside to the east, provide a greener feel here than elsewhere in the conservation area.

Negative Features and Issues

- The extremely poor condition of the former YMCA building (a statutory listed building) represents a serious risk to the future survival of this structure. Large parts of the roofing have been lost, the windows have been broken and the structure is largely open to the elements. It has become covered with buddleia bushes, which are hastening its

deterioration. The loss of this building would represent a serious adverse impact to the character and appearance of the town centre and an equally serious loss to the County Borough's stock of historic buildings.

- The former Labour Exchange is in an equally, if not worse, state of dilapidation. As a locally listed building this structure is protected by Local Plan policies, although its present condition means that the building and the area surrounding it create a zone of dereliction on the edge of the town centre.
- The former General Hospital and Theatre Royal are both important historic buildings which are vacant and gradually falling into dereliction.
- New uses for these historic buildings that would ensure their preservation are likely to require parking facilities for visitors and staff or occupants. However, parking facilities at the northern end of the town centre are already under pressure, and there is little available land for new car parks in the immediate vicinity.

7 ISSUES

Many of the issues affecting the town centre, including strategic, organisational, policy and control and economic problems have been considered recently within the Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Built Heritage Strategy and Action Plan (adopted December 2008). Issues considered here are those that represent a specific threat to the special historic or architectural interest of the town centre and its character and appearance. A key principal when addressing these issues must be to harness the past investment in skills and materials that is contained within these buildings to support the economic prosperity of the town centre and the quality of life of the people who live and work within the area.

Based on the negative features and issues identified in Chapter 6 *Character Areas*, the following are considered to be the principal matters which need to be addressed:

7.1 Buildings at risk

A high number of buildings of historic or architectural interest, including listed and locally listed buildings, have been identified as being 'at risk' from neglect:

- The Town Hall, High Street;
- The former YMCA, Pontmorlais West;
- The Theatre Royal, Penydarren Road;
- The Merthyr Tydfil Nursing Home (formerly the Merthyr Tydfil General Hospital), Penydarren Road;
- The Employment Exchange, Pontmorlais;
- The Morlais Castle public house, High Street, Pontmorlais; and

Providing new uses for these structures that ensures their restoration and long term preservation, as well as exploiting their aesthetic and historic value, will need to be a priority for the future management of the conservation area.

7.2 Vacant space

A considerable number of buildings in the conservation area are either vacant or have significant vacant space on their upper floors. This represents a failure to make the best use of the historic building stock, which will have negative consequences for the local economy and the vibrancy of the town centre. The lack of an appropriate use and regular maintenance is likely to result in the gradual deterioration of these buildings, resulting in a negative impact on the character and appearance of the conservation area, and, potentially, jeopardising the preservation of the buildings themselves. Whilst it is not possible to identify all buildings which are underused, at the time of the survey undertaken for the character appraisal the vacant historic buildings in the conservation area included all of the buildings identified as being at risk (see above), as well as:

- The Palace Cinema, Castle Street;
- Nos. 26, 46, 67A, 106, 107, 110, 116, 130, 138, 143, and 145 High Street;
- No. 2 Morlais Buildings, High Street, Pontmorlais;
- English Wesleyan Methodist Church, High Street, Pontmorlais;

- Nos. 12, 15, and 19 High Street, Pontmorlais;
- Nos. 3, 9 and 12 Glebeland Street;
- The former Log Cabin public house, Swan Street; and
- No. 2 Three Salmon Street.

The majority of these buildings are shops. Their empty status reflects both nationally prevalent economic conditions, as well as particular pressure on the economic vitality of the town centre area resulting from local conditions.

7.3 Loss of Shopfronts

The conservation area is remarkable for the good preservation of architectural features on buildings, particularly at first and second floor levels, which make an important contribution to the special historic and architectural interest of the area. However, many of the shops have lost their historic shopfronts, which have either been replaced in uPVC or aluminium, or have generic 'heritage' timber shopfronts, which lack the imaginative design and detailing of the originals. Historic photographs reveal that many of these shopfronts extended to first floor level, maximising the space within the building and making the best use of the available frontage.

The loss of these shopfronts represents a gradual erosion of the area's historic character and appearance and a loss of its architectural interest. A greater control of alterations to shopfronts would be desirable, whilst the production of a well researched Shopfront Design Guide for the town centre would represent a valuable tool in managing changes to shopfronts in the conservation area.

The proliferation of hot food takeaways in the town centre has had a particularly negative impact on its character and appearance because of the number and density of frontages that are rendered inactive during the daytime. The use of external security shutters adds further to the overall sense of neglect, and internal security shutters are therefore preferred.

7.4 Problems of Maintenance

The growth of buddleia on the main frontages of numerous buildings throughout the conservation area has a negative impact on the area's character and appearance, as well as affecting the structural condition of many of these buildings over time. However, many of the bushes are at first and second floor level, requiring scaffolding or lifting equipment to reach them. The Council might help to co-ordinate the hire of equipment to remove problem foliage from the frontages of several properties at a time, to reduce the cost for individual property owners.

7.5 Intrusive buildings

A number of later 20th century buildings in the town centre or on its peripheries have an intrusive impact on the character and appearance of the conservation area as a result of their unsympathetic design and materials, including the use of brown brick and monotonous facades of concrete and render. These buildings should be regarded as opportunities for enhancement. The recent renovation of Nos. 26 and 27 High Street provides an excellent example of how such buildings can be improved through careful design and detailing.

7.6 Bus Station and shopping precinct

The Merthyr Tydfil Bus Station was constructed as part of the wider redevelopment of the western 'riverside' edge of the town, which included the adjacent shopping centre. As a result its design naturally channels arrivals into the 1960s shopping centre, rather than into the historic town centre. Additionally, access to the bus station from Victoria Street, Glebeland Street and Castle Street, is made less attractive by the poor quality public realm at the western ends of these streets, and the use of Wheatsheaf Lane as a taxi rank, looped around a prominently positioned block of public toilets. This area, located directly adjacent to the conservation area, has significant potential for enhancement. This should aim to reduce the intrusive impact of the shopping precinct's unattractive buildings, encourage visitors into the town centre, and improve views and routes between the conservation area and its immediate environs.

7.7 Areas for enhancement inside the conservation area

The town centre has recently received significant investment in public realm improvements in the High Street, the Lower High Street Square and along High Street Pontmorlais. However, a number of side street areas remain that would benefit from investment in the public realm. In particular these include:

- Victoria Street;
- Castle Street and Castle Yard;
- Post Office Lane; and
- John Street.

In addition to public realm enhancements, improved building maintenance and the opening up and enhancement of several of the town centre's back street areas and courts would help to realise the potential these provide to create distinctive and characteristic spaces. Such areas include:

- Wheatsheaf Lane;
- Mill Lane (including Bowens Court);
- Chapel Lane;
- Masonic Lane;
- Tramroadside North;
- The narrow passage to the south of the Orient Express leading to Castle Yard Car Park.

7.8 Need to manage change to unlisted 'positive' buildings

The conservation area contains a large number of buildings that have been identified as making a positive contribution to the conservation area's special historic or architectural interest. Government guidance states that there is a presumption that all 'positive' buildings should be retained. Any applications for change or full or partial demolition will therefore be particularly carefully assessed by the Council, having special regard to the desirability of 'preserving or enhancing' the character and appearance of the conservation area

7.9 Control of new development

In fulfilment of the town centre regeneration strategy (adopted October 2002) the town centre is likely to be the focus of major new developments in the near future. When considering proposals for new development the Council will have special regard to the desirability of preserving or enhancing the special historic and architectural interest of the conservation area and its character and appearance. In fulfilling this responsibility the Council will promote the use of vacant or underused historic buildings and particularly those identified as 'at risk'.

7.10 Monitoring and enforcement

The designation of the conservation area and this character appraisal represent a starting point for the managed and sustained improvement of Merthyr Tydfil's town centre. However, to achieve these improvements regular monitoring of changes within the conservation area, and enforcement of the additional controls on development provided, must be undertaken.

8 REFERENCES

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9 USEFUL ADDRESSES

Cadw

Georgian Group

Victorian Society

Twentieth Century Society

Society for the protection of Ancient Buildings

Council for British Archaeology

Ancient Monuments Society

10 CONTACT DETAILS