

# Blaenau Ffestiniog: Understanding Urban Character



Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru  
Welsh Assembly Government



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# Introduction

## Aims of the Study

Urban characterization aims to describe and explain the historic character of towns to give a focus to local distinctiveness and to serve as a tool for the sustainable management of the historic environment. It seeks to inform and support positive conservation and regeneration programmes, help improve the quality of planning advice, and contribute to local interpretation and education strategies.

Urban characterization defines the distinctive historical character of individual towns, and identifies the variety of character within them, recognizing that this character is fundamental to local

distinctiveness and pride of place, and is an asset in regeneration. It looks at how the history of a town is expressed in its plan and topography, in areas of archaeological potential, and in its architectural character. The survey is not just an audit of features, but a reconstruction of the themes and processes which have shaped the town.

The immediate purpose of this study is to inform emerging proposals for regeneration in Blaenau Ffestiniog. These plans focus on the centre of the town, but this study examines the historic character of the whole of the built-up area of the town, and it is intended that this study will provide a baseline for strategic planning as well as local management, including housing renewal.

*The town of Blaenau Ffestiniog, dominated by the slate quarries which sustained it (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*





# Historical Development



*Blaenau Ffestiniog about 1924: a thoroughly industrial town (© The Francis Frith Collection).*

## Blaenau Ffestiniog before the Slate Quarries

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The town of Blaenau Ffestiniog owes its existence entirely to the development of slate quarrying during the nineteenth century. Situated on the margin between the lower-lying enclosed lands and the uplands (the *blaenau*) of the historic parish of Ffestiniog, this was once a remote region with only a few farms, open fields and sheep walks; but in this unlikely location grew what became, for a time, the largest town in Merioneth. For generations small and sporadic slate workings had probably taken place in the vicinity (there are documentary references to quarrying from the sixteenth century), but it was only after about 1760 that the potential value of the mountains for slate quarrying on a revolutionary scale was realized.

The slate quarries — and to a lesser extent the town itself — have obliterated many traces of the pre-industrial landscape, but it still asserts itself in relics that symbolize a different pattern of land use. Farmhouses survive at Cwm Bowydd, Gelli, and Pen y Bryn, and there are also ruined buildings amongst the small enclosures at Cefn Bychan. Other farms are memorialized in place names: the former farm of Maenofferen has lent its name to the area of the town around Wynne Road. The farm itself lay between Wynne Avenue and Maenofferen Street, behind Fairview (formerly Maenofferen Cottages), but it apparently burnt down in the nineteenth century. Slate tips buried Rhiwbryfdir Farm in the 1890s, and Tan y Manod Farm was demolished in the 1960s to make way for social housing. Here and there, a pattern of small fields survives on the edge of the town, for example between High Street and the road leading to the former Diffwys Quarry from Tan y Manod, and on the slopes





below Manod Road and High Street. Some of the footpaths, tracks and roads are also the legacy of an agricultural land use. Other place names hold clues to this earlier history — Hafod Ruffydd, where 'Hafod' implies early agricultural practice. To some extent, agriculture continued alongside industry and was never completely replaced by it. Indeed, the nineteenth-century town included some industries directly related to farming (the fulling mill at Tan y Grisau being one example).

## From Sheep to Slate: The Development of the Quarries

*'The population of Ffestiniog has much increased of late in consequence of the employment offered in the slate quarries in the immediate neighbourhood, which are carried out with considerable spirit by some wealthy companies'.<sup>1</sup>*

### Ownership and Land Use

Ownership and land use in the late eighteenth century was based on a series of farms, many of which belonged to landed estates. The development of slate extraction in a series of different quarries took place firmly within this pattern of landownership, which also helped to shape settlement in the nineteenth-century town.

The first quarry to be developed in the area was Diffwys; it lay on Gelli Farm, which was the



property of the Wynns of Peniarth. In about 1760, experienced quarrymen from Cilgwyn in Arfon began quarrying slate on Gelli Farm. They were led by one Methusalem Jones, said to have come to Ffestiniog following a revelation in a dream that there was slate in the Diffwys Gorge. The farm was leased by eight partners in 1776, but in 1800 this Welsh partnership was bought out by a group of entrepreneurs including William Turner and William Casson, both quarry managers from the English Lake District. They acquired the freehold of Gelli Farm, and began a massive expansion of the quarry, where underground working had started by 1820.<sup>2</sup>

*Gelli Farm (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

There was another substantial local estate centred on Plas Tan y Bwlch near Maentwrog, which was owned by the Oakeley family in the nineteenth century. It included land to the west of the valley, with the uplands above it, where three major slate quarries ultimately combined as the Oakeley Slate Mine in 1882. The first of these (Lower Quarry) was established on Rhiwbryddir Farm in 1819 by Samuel Holland, and was taken over by the Welsh Slate and Copper Mining Company in 1828. Above this were Middle Quarry or Gloddfa Ganol, and Upper (Hollands) Quarry.<sup>3</sup>

The Glynllifon estate, owned by Lord Newborough, also held land in this area. It was on its Cwm Bowydd Farm and Maenofferen Farm that much of the town developed during the nineteenth century. Lord (also known as Bowydd) Quarry, Fotty and Maenofferen Quarries were also developed on Glynllifon land. Quarrying at Lord Quarry began in 1779, and Lord Newborough involved himself in its operation from 1802. The quarry had small beginnings —



*Slate quarries are still a powerful presence above the town (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

employing six men in 1788, and thirteen soon after 1802. It worked only intermittently until taken on by John Greaves in 1834. Fotty Quarry was being worked by 1813 (taking its name from an adjacent farm called Haffotty — proving yet another link with pre-industrial land use), while Llechwedd Quarry was developed by Greaves after 1846, on an area of shared grazing.<sup>4</sup>

There were several smaller estates. The Tan y Grisiau estate was leased from 1823 by Samuel Holland of the Welsh Slate Company, and the Glan y Pwll, Tan y Manod and Cae-du estates were all locally owned in the nineteenth century. On each, industrial activity and urban development was undertaken to varying degrees. Samuel Holland was particularly active in promoting development at Tan y Grisiau, for example.

The presence of so many individual estates shaped the character of the slate industry, as each developed its own quarry on its own land. The character of the town, as a series of settlement areas each with their own identity, is also a direct consequence of this pattern of landownership. Place names continue to give strong clues about ownership — Lord Street, Newborough Street, Wynne Road, Glynllifon Street, and Baron Road all refer to the Newborough estate, for example.

## A Working Landscape

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If the quarries were originally contained by the farmland on which they developed, they quickly became prominent elements of the landscape in their own right, radically changing its form, visually dominant, and helping to shape other development.

Early workings were opencast, but from the 1820s onwards the rock had to be followed deep into underground chambers, because the cost of removing overburden for surface working became too great. Extensive underground workings were established, requiring elaborate pumping and drainage systems as well as a cost-effective means of moving both workable rock and waste within the quarries. The first internal railway in a Ffestiniog quarry dates from 1804, and their use was practically universal by the 1820s. They required extensive flat areas for sidings and yards, and inclined planes to deal with changes of level. The engineering of these features, often on massive stone walls, is a distinctive feature of the landscape immediately outside the town.

From the mid-nineteenth century, much of the processing of the slate took place in large





industrial mill buildings sited within the quarries. There is only one off-site slab mill for Diffwys Quarry within the town, at Pant yr Ynn. This geographical separation was accommodated by strong transport links — railways and inclined planes, but also by paths connecting the town to remote places of work. This network of connections remains an important feature of the landscape around the town.

Vast quantities of waste were produced, engulfing the sheep walks, some farms, and even some of the first generation of industrial housing. These sculpted waste heaps are dramatic testimony to the sheer scale of extraction.

Another by-product of quarrying was the generation of electricity: the first public supply in Gwynedd was generated at Dolwen, serving not only the quarries but also the town. This was the first time that a public electricity supply had been generated entirely by water in the United Kingdom. Llechwedd Quarry established its private supply in 1904–05 at Pant yr Afon. More recently, the pumped storage scheme at Tan y Grisau was the stimulus for radical interventions in the landscape, most notably the construction of the reservoir and of new access roads.

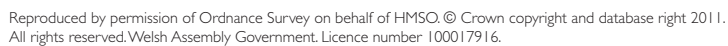
Although slate extraction dominates the landscape, it was not the only quarrying to be undertaken in the area. Two quarries — at Cefn Bychan (the Ffestiniog Granite Quarry) and Manod — extracted ‘granite’ (this may not be its geological definition). There were also several smaller quarries of convenience for building stone, opened to serve the needs of the growing town — a good example survives to the south of Jones Street.



*Top left: An inclined plane is a strong feature of the landscape above Pant yr Ynn (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

*Above: Pant yr Ynn was built as a slab mill for Diffwys Quarry (The National Library of Wales).*

*Left and below: Slate waste piled high above the town (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



## The Town Takes Shape: Infrastructure

## Roads

extensive series of tracks and footpaths. One of these early routes is shown on the 1818 draft Ordnance Survey map. It ran along the west side of the Afon Bowydd from Ty'n y Cefn (on the present A496 south-west of the town), climbing via Bryn Bowydd and the modern Dorvil Road to a point near where St David's Church stands on the site of an earlier dwelling, Penrhos-bach. Thence it led to Rhiwbryddir Farm and Tal y Waenydd and over the Crimea Pass to Dolwyddelan. Access to Maenofferen Farm was via a track leading from this road, approximating to the line of the present Church Street and Maenofferen Street. Another early route probably went from Llan Ffestiniog by Congl y Wal, thence dipping to the valley floor, passing Cwm Bowydd Farm and crossing Pont Frongoch before climbing up towards Maenofferen Farm.

Only part of the modern main road through the settlement corresponds to a pre-industrial road line; this is Church Street, which once gave access to the lost Maenofferen Farm. The rest of the modern route was made as a direct response to the growth of the quarries and the need to establish good lines of communication from them to the quays at Maentwrog. The earlier roads survive as footpaths, and a pre-industrial history also asserts itself in other footpaths that radiate out from Cwm Bowydd Farm. The meandering line of Cae Clyd is probably another early route, joining farmsteads to the east with the through-route to Dolwyddelan from Congl y Wal. The winding path at Fucheswen might be another.

The development of the quarries put considerable pressure on the existing network of routes and also necessitated new connections, both from the quarries to existing roads, and to the wharves on the Dwyryd from whence slate was first exported. Privately built tracks and cart roads from the quarries are recorded from 1801.

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*The town of Blaenau Ffestiniog, strung out along historical route-ways surviving as tracks and footpaths, and along the network of roads developed to serve the slate quarries (Crown Copyright: MOD).*

By 1818, a link had been established between the road to Lord Quarry and the early track that led from Penrhos-bach to Maenofferen Farm, thus creating the line of High Street and Church Street. In 1825, Samuel Holland made another new road from the junction of these existing roads (henceforward known as Four Crosses) to Tan y Manod and the Diffwys partners' road at Bethania. This completed the main axis through the town. By 1839–41, this road (the present A470) had become the backbone of the emerging settlement.

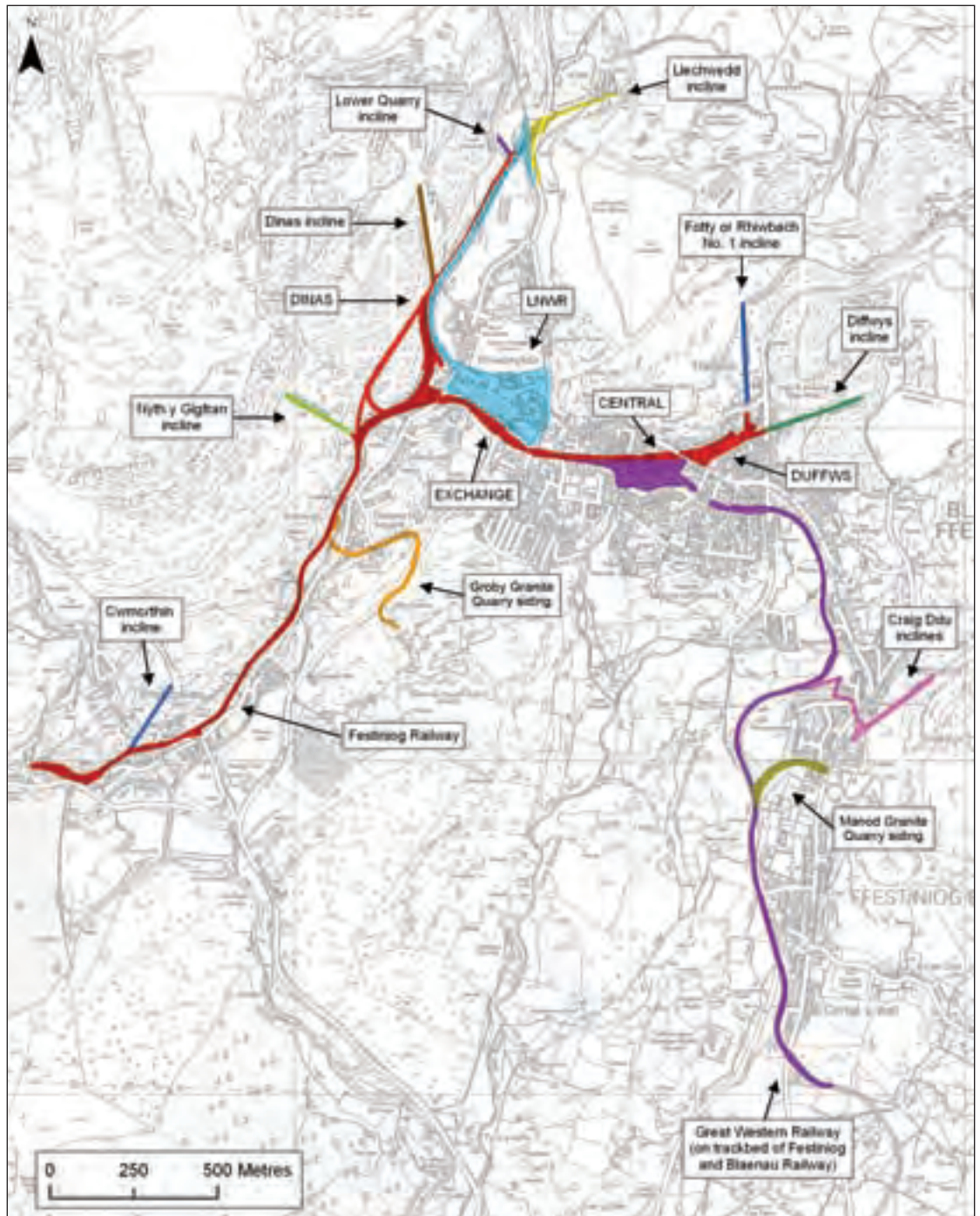
On the west side of the valley, a new road from Cwmorthin Quarry and Tan y Grisïau to Rhyd y Sarn (on the A496 west of Llan Ffestiniog) was

constructed in the 1820s. This provided another route to the quays at Maentwrog, and was linked across the valley to Congl y Wal and the Diffwys partners' road by Ffordd Casson. These roads survive in the line of the modern A496 below Tan y Grisïau and the minor road that connects it with Congl y Wal. Then in the 1830s, Samuel Holland built a road from Glan y Pwll to Tan y Grisïau, virtually completing the horseshoe of roads along which the town developed.<sup>5</sup>

Thereafter, there were no major changes to the road system until the construction of the upper section of the A496 west of the town in 1963, and the upgrading of the A470 at Pant yr Afon from 2005.



*A network of railways was crucial in the development of the town and its industry.*



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## Railways

Of the three public railways which served Blaenau, the Festiniog Railway, which opened in 1836, was the earliest and did most to transform the town and make the fortunes of its slate industry. On this railway, slate was carried out on the first stage of its journey all over the world, and building materials, consumer goods, and even quarrymen, were brought into the town. The line was established in the earliest days of building the town, and it exerted

considerable influence on the location and layout of settlement.

It was Samuel Holland who was instrumental in obtaining a bill to build a railway to Porthmadog from the quarries and, initially, he was the only quarry owner to use it, some refusing to touch it until the 1860s. However, over the years, more and more branches were constructed from the quarries to the railway — one even extended over the moorland to quarries in Penmachno parish. Although some of the early inclined planes associated with these



*Above: Housing aligned with the railway in the town centre (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*Left: The line of the Festiniog Railway as it threads through the town (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

and the Craig Ddu inclines (1865–87). Other branches were the Manod Granite Quarry siding and the Groby Granite Quarry siding.<sup>6</sup>

Steam traction was introduced on the Festiniog Railway in 1863 and passenger services in 1865. A branch line to Llan Ffestiniog opened in 1868 and, at one time or another, the railway operated four passenger stations (Dinas, Exchange, Central, Duffws) within 0.6 miles (1km) of each other at Blaenau, acting as a natural hub for the developing town.

By the 1870s, the railway not only directly served all the major quarries, but also had direct access to Holland's iron foundry in Tan y Grisiau (established in 1851), two timber yards, a steam corn mill, the market hall and two coal yards. It had its own goods shed at the Duffws terminus.

The London and North West Railway (LNWR) arrived (from Llandudno Junction) in 1879, and the Great Western Railway from Bala in 1883 (on the trackbed of the Festiniog branch line to Ffestiniog). Further stations, a railway hotel (now demolished), and interchange yards between standard and narrow-gauge systems were all established. Most of the Victorian rail infrastructure has been lost, with only Duffws station surviving, albeit reused since the 1930s as public conveniences. Nonetheless the railway corridors continue to thread through the town, and are an important component of the townscape.

branch lines have been buried by slate rubble, many survive, and are a distinctive and important feature of the landscape. Examples include Cwmorthin (1861–62), Nith y Gigfran (about 1867), Dinas incline (1905), Lower Quarry incline (1872), Llechwedd incline (1854), Fotty or Rhiwbach incline (1862), Diffwys incline (1864),





## Building a Town

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*'Ffestiniog is a small but increasing village. Population 1,648, principally employed in the slate quarries about four miles from the village. Mrs Oakeley of Tan y Bwlch has built and endowed a chapel of ease near the quarries, consecrated September last. It is intended for the convenience of the inhabitants of the houses that have been built in the vicinity of the quarries.'*<sup>7</sup>

## The Chronology of Development

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As we have seen, Blaenau was nothing more than a few farms at the end of the eighteenth century. A hundred years later, it had all the trappings of a town, based almost exclusively on a single industry and with a population that had grown from 3,460 in 1851, to 11,274 in 1881.<sup>8</sup> In 1873, the Welsh Slate Company Quarry employed about 700 men, Hollands Quarry, about 500, and Llechwedd, 330. Contrast this with the thirteen





men employed in Lord (or Bowydd) Quarry soon after Lord Newborough began working it in 1802, or the twelve men who worked at Diffwys Quarry in 1794. Even in 1800, only about sixty men in total worked in the quarries of Blaenau Ffestiniog.<sup>9</sup>

Even though there was a sufficiently large population in the immediate vicinity of Blaenau to warrant the establishment of a church and a school in the 1840s, it was not until the 1860s and especially the 1870s, during the boom years of the slate industry, that something resembling a town really took shape. It was in this period that linear development along what had become the main road began to be supplemented by planned developments away from its axis. Bowydd Street, Leeds Street and Cromwell Street were at the planning stage in 1874. Wesley Street and Glynllifon Street date from the 1870s as does Park Square, Tan y Clogwyn, Summerhill and Richmond Terrace. The plans for New Market Square and the streets associated with it were drawn up by Charles Easton Spooner, engineer

of the Festiniog Railway, in 1876–77. In 1887, however, the square itself was still little more than a field, with houses laid out along its northern and part of its eastern perimeter. The houses on Bowydd Road and Cwm Bowydd Road date from the 1880s, as do Oxford Terrace and Picton Terrace. In Bethania and Manod, terraces date variously from the 1870s to the 1890s, with some earlier rows.<sup>10</sup>

It was a similar story to the west, where most of the development followed the line of the road from Tan y Grisau to Glan y Pwll, and Rhiwbryfdir. Here, however, there was very little in the way of planned developments away from the road line: Oakeley Square was not started until the 1890s and was never completed.

The gradual closure of many of the quarries after 1914 meant that there was little pressure for further development in the twentieth century and the town has retained its nineteenth-century extent and character to a remarkable degree. With the exception of social-housing schemes

*Both pages: Small-scale planned developments of the 1870s and 1880s (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*





*Above (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW) and top right (© Falcon Hildred): Yr Unicorn, an unusual and distinctive cottage design for the Glynllifon estate, owners of Lord Quarry.*

*Right: Dolgarregddu Terrace is amongst the earliest of surviving houses within the town (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*







*Urban housing along the main road whose line was completed in 1825. Differences in the stonework betray the fact that many terraces were the work of more than one builder (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

at Benar Road/Jones Street and at Manod, development in the twentieth century has been on a very small scale.

### The Organization of Building

For many years after the beginning of commercial quarrying in about 1760, existing farmhouses and agricultural labourers' dwellings were sufficient to accommodate the relatively small numbers of quarrymen, many of whom only lodged in the area on a weekly basis. The first building projects were small-scale and haphazard. A cluster of houses known as *pentre* (village) or Tai Newyddion y Gloddfa was erected from 1806 onwards on Gelli land to house Diffwys quarrymen; there were other houses built at Pant y Lleidr on the Oakeley estate by 1824.<sup>11</sup> All of these houses have long been covered by slate rubble. In 1825, the manager of Newborough's Lord Quarry, John Hughes, built a number of cottages on Glynllifon land, one of which survives as Yr Unicorn.<sup>12</sup> Dolgarregddu Terrace was also built on Glynllifon land, in 1838–39.<sup>13</sup>

As the quarries continued to grow, so did the scale and ambition of individual building projects. However, there were several focal points for development, which only gradually coalesced into a recognizable town.

With few exceptions, housing was generally organized as terraced rows, rather than as single houses, regardless of how it was provided. Building leases became the most common way in which housing provision was arranged, and the Tan y Manod estate was the first to lease out land for quarrymen to build their own houses.<sup>14</sup> These are probably represented by the oldest of

the straggling houses along the present A470 between Congl y Wal and Tan y Manod. Plots were set out, allowing individual builders to take responsibility for their development. Characteristically, units of development were small — even a single terrace may have had more than one builder. Building societies were important in enabling quarrymen to finance small-scale building projects: the Ffestiniog Building Society was established in 1836 and it is probably no coincidence that the registered office of the Merionethshire Building Society, established in 1877, was in Blaenau Ffestiniog.<sup>15</sup>

Some housing was provided directly by quarry companies and landowners. Cwmorthin Quarry erected houses on the Tan y Grisau estate from the 1830s, as well as providing the workmen with a reading room.<sup>16</sup> However, it was Samuel Holland as landowner who built the greatest number of houses here from 1836 onwards. By 1845 forty-two dwellings and other buildings, including three chapels, had been erected.<sup>17</sup> The earliest of these were built facing the Festiniog Railway, until the road supplanted it as the main focus for building.

Some housing development took place away from the town itself. Houses for specialist quarry workers, such as winding-engine drivers and their families, were built by the quarry companies and tended to be located in the quarries themselves. Some such buildings, much adapted to the requirements of tourism, survive at Llechwedd's Quarry Tours operation. There is a listed row of quarrymen's cottages dating from the 1840s at Oakeley Quarry. Barracks were also provided at some of the quarries.



*Above: Some of the smallest houses of the nineteenth-century town, recorded in photographs, but now demolished (The National Library of Wales).*

*Above right: The former Central School, Wynne Road (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

*Opposite: Ysgol Glan y Pwll, recorded by John Thomas in the late nineteenth century (The National Library of Wales).*

## Building and Society

Industrial development created a town where there had not been one before. Blaenau Ffestiniog was essentially a working community, and very few of the moneyed families lived in the immediate vicinity. Of the major landowners, the Newborough family were based in Glynllifon, administering their Ffestiniog lands through an agent, and only Mrs Oakeley of Tan y Bwlch seems to have had much interest in the social welfare of the community, establishing a church in 1841–42 and a hospital in 1848. William Turner and his colleagues, Samuel Holland, and the Greaves family of Llechwedd Quarry, at one time or another all made their homes in the area — the Greaves' home, Plas Weunydd of 1870, survives as the offices of Llechwedd Quarry. As they grew wealthier, however, they either moved away or withdrew from active participation in the town and its development. Instead, the local elite was drawn from the ranks

of the workers, from quarry stewards, ministers of religion and local professionals. The pattern of building closely reflects the social structure of this working town, with a relatively 'flat' hierarchy of types — many small terraced houses subtly distinguished one from another, a small number of larger semi-detached houses, and a tiny number of detached houses. Historical photographs suggest that this hierarchy has been truncated by the loss of some of the smallest house-types, but what survives still presents remarkably detailed evidence for the structure of this industrial town.

Early accounts of Blaenau stress its remoteness, a long way overland from Bala, Dolgellau or Llanrwst and, to be viable, the town needed to establish its own economic infrastructure. The earliest shop in the area is credited by G. J. Williams to one Captain Richards of Porthmadog, and was built next to the railway at Tan y Grisïau, though it cannot long have pre-dated the first shop at Four Crosses, opened in 1836.<sup>18</sup> Owen



Roberts, of Dolgarregddu, built the market hall in 1861–64, to plans drawn up by Owen Morris of Porthmadog. Many of the buildings on Church Street, between the railway station and Four Crosses, were built as shops in the mid-nineteenth century, but the most flamboyant building was the Cocoa Rooms and Temperance Café. Built in 1878–79, it later served as a library, a council chamber and a magistrates' court, and it is now a licensed club. Brymer's Department Store and the Co-op indicate that local purchasing power was still considerable until after the First World War.

Education was an important aspect of social provision in Blaenau Ffestiniog. The town boasts a good series of schools, the first of which was the British School, built in 1846. Others are: Ysgol Glan y Pwll — now workshops, but built as a Board School in 1880; the former Central School, Wynne Road (now the Community Centre); and Ysgol y Moelwyn, Wynne Road (1899–1900). There are also schools at Manod and Tan y Grisiau.<sup>19</sup>







*Capel Tabernacl, Mount Pleasant, in about 1875 (The National Library of Wales).*

Along with the schools, chapels also give a strong indication of the scale and ambition of the community. Construction of large and architecturally flamboyant chapels began in the 1860s, coinciding with the growing boom in the slate industry. G. J. Williams quotes Samuel Holland as observing that houses grew up around chapels, which suggests that chapels sometimes acted as nodes for settlement.<sup>20</sup> Several have been demolished, but surviving

examples include: Bethesda Calvinistic Methodist Chapel, Manod Road (1848); Carmel Independent Chapel, Tan y Grisiau (1861–62); Jerusalem Independent Chapel, Four Crosses (1867–68); Rhiw Calvinistic Methodist Chapel, Rhiwbryfdir (1867–68); Capel Seion, Lord Street (1879); Bowydd Calvinistic Methodist Chapel, The Square (1882); and Calfaria Baptist Chapel, Towyn Road (1881–82).<sup>21</sup>

# Historical Topography



Blaenau Ffestiniog is strongly linear, strung out mainly along the A470, with Tan y Grisiau completing the horseshoe of development around the head of Cwm Bowydd. This through route was assembled piecemeal, but had been completed by about 1830. Rapid urban growth was initiated several decades later; and the road was the obvious framework for it; although the Festiniog Railway also influenced the alignment of settlement, especially where it pre-dated the road, as at Tan y Grisiau. The town developed away from the road either where there were other transport axes (roads, railways and inclines from the quarries), or where small parcels of land were made available for development.



*Above: The thin line of urban settlement at Manod (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

*Left: Houses aligned with the railway at Tan y Grisiau (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*The natural topography of Cwm Bowydd divided one part of the town from another (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*Right: An unusual example of a formally planned layout (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*Far right: Oakeley Square was never completed (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*From some vantage points, the backs of houses are a prominent feature of the townscape (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



Piecemeal growth associated with different landowners and linked to different quarries encouraged the development of separate settlements, each with its own cultural identity, notwithstanding strong similarities in the building stock. Although strung out along the main road and linked by it, these settlement areas were often also divided by topography or transport features. The steep scoop of Cwm Bowydd, for example, divided Fron-fawr from Maenofferen and, in turn, the railway line effectively separated Maenofferen from the town centre. More recently, the A496 has severed Tan y Grisau from the rest of the town. Units of planning were generally small — small terraced rows and small blocks of land — and there were a few attempts at formalized planning, such as in the area around The Square, and

the little grid of streets behind it. Whatever ambitions there were for Oakeley Square were never fully realized. Elsewhere, the character of development was largely opportunistic — a series of small-scale building projects relied on a network of roads and paths to unite them.

The natural topography of the area contributed decisively to the character of the settlement. The town occupies a shelf on steeply sloping ground: development runs mostly along the contours, and hooks right round the head of Cwm Bowydd. There are therefore many views over and across the town, and the backs of houses are often as prominent as the fronts from one vantage point or another.

# The Character of Building



## Building Style and Detail

The earliest surviving houses are from the 1820s and 1830s, but most building activity was between 1860 and 1880, with the rate of growth slowing down thereafter. With the exception of a series of self-contained public-housing developments in the post-war period, there is little twentieth-century development, and there have been only small-scale losses, making Blaenau an especially well-preserved nineteenth-century industrial town.

With the exception of the main commercial axis, building is remarkably uniform from Congl y Wal right round to Tan y Grisiau, mostly consisting of terraced rows of variable length, usually made up of houses of uniform plan. The earliest surviving terraced houses are those at Dolgarregddu, which

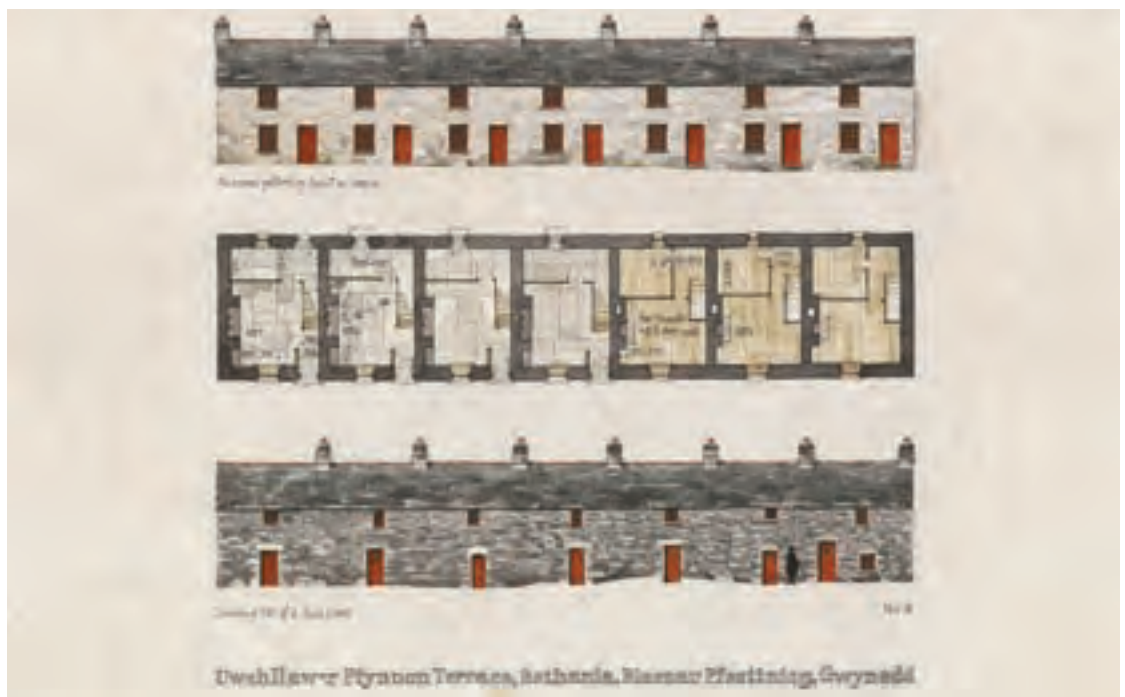


are double-fronted (representing an application of traditions of building developed in a rural context), with long and low proportions and often relatively small window openings. This plan type occurs elsewhere in the town, and is probably indicative of a building date before the mid-nineteenth century. Other early housing is notable for its small size and, sometimes, the irregularity of openings.

*Above and left:  
A double-fronted plan  
is a feature of some of  
the earliest house-types  
in the town (Crown  
Copyright: RCAHWW).*



*Small early cottages at Bethania (Right: Crown Copyright: RCAHMW; Below: © Falcon Hildred).*



Later housing is much more uniform, characteristically single-fronted with a double-depth plan, and it is this type that dominates the town. There are small variations in size — the most significant being whether there are one or two windows in the first floor — and there are also subtle differences in storey heights and in property width. There are few departures from this form. One such departure is visible in larger houses such as those on Bowydd Road and in The Square. In The Square, an attic storey is given round-arched windows in gabled dormers.

Other examples of this type are to be found here and there in the bigger houses of the town. Another departure from a strongly conventional plan is where a more consciously picturesque style was used — Yr Unicorn is the most remarkable example of this, but other later examples are the terraces in Park Square and at Isfryn Terrace, Bethania. There are small numbers of individually built houses, their rarity a reflection of the distinctive social structure of this industrial town.



*Differences of scale in single-fronted houses contribute to the varied character of the townscape (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*Larger houses have their own distinguishing character: Bowydd Road (far left) and The Square (left) (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*Picturesque detail distinguishes housing in Park Square (far left) and Isfryn Terrace (left) (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*Individually built houses like these are relatively rare in Blaenau Ffestiniog (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*Varied boundary detail is an important component of the townscape (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



Another significant component of character is the relationship of house to street — whether there are front gardens, front yards, or whether the buildings are straight onto the pavement. Where there are front gardens or yards, the boundary treatment is an important component of the townscape. Wall construction is varied, including slate as well as rubble, and there are some slate-pillar fences, and a rich tradition of decorative ironwork for railings.





*Surviving sash windows are rare and should be treasured (Crown Copyright: RCAHMMW).*



Sash windows were once ubiquitous, but with the march of UPVC are now rare survivals. The earlier terraces probably had twelve-pane sash windows originally, but by the time of the boom years of the 1860s and 1870s, the four-pane and then the two-pane sash predominated; there were some variations, including sashes with margin lights.

*Chimneys were a prominent feature of the townscape in the 1950s, but many have now been lost (The National Library of Wales).*



*Missing chimneys, varied surface treatment and piecemeal changes to detail mar the essential formality of housing in The Square (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*The use of render obscures original stonework detail (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



The essential unity of the terraced form has been steadily eroded, not only by changes in surface treatment (render and sandblasting), but also by the loss of chimneys, and the piecemeal approach to new windows and to pointing — in Lord Street for example.





*Missing chimneys, and modern render and window detail have eroded the original character of this terrace (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*Loss of chimneys has damaged the original rhythm of the terrace (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*Park Square: Picturesque detail has been lost in the modern replacement of porches (left) and gable detail (below) (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*





*Large-scale building and architectural render are characteristic of the town centre near Diffwys Square (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*Visual variety is a characteristic of the commercial centre of the town (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



Church Street and High Street developed with mainly commercial property. Although strong individual designs are rare (the former North and South Wales Bank — now HSBC Bank — and the former Cocoa Rooms are two notable exceptions), commercial building traditions here are quite distinct from the residential. There is a wider set of variations and a richer vocabulary of detail. Many of these buildings owe their character to the late nineteenth century, when the

prosperity of the town was at its height and best able to sustain a dynamic commercial economy. In the core of the town near Diffwys Square particularly, many buildings are of a larger scale often with three storeys, and many have ornamental cornices, flamboyant gables and other embellishments. Whereas exposed stone predominates for the domestic building, commercial buildings are more often rendered, and this had its own stylistic traditions.



*Distinctive detail marks out individual shop buildings (Crown Copyright: RCAHMMW).*





## Materials: City of Slates?

### Building Stones

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Slate, notwithstanding that it was the basis of the town's existence, is not the dominant building material in Blaenau Ffestiniog. Although nearly everything in the town is stone-built, it is other locally available building stones that were almost always used. Important variations in appearance arise partly from the choice of stone, but also from its finish and treatment, ranging from uncoursed rubble, to coursed and dressed blocks. If at first sight the town presents a uniform

appearance, closer examination belies this initial impression. Amongst the ordinary housing stock there are at least ten different techniques for finishing a wall, ranging from random rubble intended to be limewashed, through coursed stonework in a variety of sizes — from large blocks to small rubble, to squared and dressed stone. This variety gives us a strong clue to the organization of building: sometimes even a single terrace displays different stonework styles, suggesting that it is the work of more than one hand. This probably reflects the use of building leases, enabling quarrymen to take responsibility for the construction of their own houses.





*Both pages: Contrasting stonework styles (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*Limewash and render were once more common as a finish for stone (The National Library of Wales).*



*Right: Surviving examples of limewash and render are now rare on domestic buildings (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*Top right and bottom right: Render used decoratively on commercial property (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

There is some evidence for the use of renders and limewash, which may once have been more widespread on rubble walls. Render was always common on the commercial properties of High Street and Church Street, often with its own decorative treatment. The use of modern renders in recent renewal work for housing is undermining the overall uniformity of terraced rows; it is also obscuring the subtle differences in the handling of stone, which are such an important reminder of the many individuals involved in building the town.







*Left: A fine example of slate roofing at Yr Unicorn (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*Slate as a walling material is rare in the town, but was sometimes used for outbuildings (far left) and ancillary structures (left) (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

An important status marker for places of worship, banks, and other prestigious buildings, was the use of non-local stone. Examples are the sandstone windows and belfry in the parish church, and the limestone in the former Cocoa Rooms.

Locally quarried slate is virtually universal for roofing; mostly it is laid in evenly sized slates, although there are some instances of random roofs, and also of the use of shaped slate. Slate was also frequently used for ancillary features such as garden walls and outhouses.



*Brick provides a striking accent to late nineteenth-century housing on Wynne Road (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

## Brick

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The opening of the railway from Bala Junction in 1881 paved the way for brick and ceramic products from the Ruabon area to reach Blaenau Ffestiniog. In practice, brick is a rare commodity in the town, and where it occurs it lends a distinctive character.

## Imported timber

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Pine imported from the Baltic and the New World arrived in Gwynedd in the 1820s and became commonplace from around the mid-century. For Blaenau, an immediate context for the introduction of pine was probably the establishment, in 1848–50, of a steam sawmill at

Boston Lodge on the Festiniog Railway. The first substantial structures using imported pine in Blaenau were Holland's foundry of 1851 in Tan y Grisïau, the first mill at Llechwedd Quarry (1851–52), and the Welsh Slate Company's viaduct over the Barlwyd, of which now only one column and an abutment survive. Other large industrial buildings requiring pine trusses also appear from the early 1850s, followed by architecturally pretentious chapels of which the earliest to survive are Carmel, Tan y Grisïau, and Salem, Rhiwbryfdir, of 1861 and 1861–62 respectively. The market hall of 1861–64 is another notable building relying on exceptionally long spans of timber for its architectural effect. The importance of eastern European pine to the developing town may be indirectly acknowledged in the name of The Baltic Hotel.



# Character Areas



## 1. Benar Road and The Square

### Historical Background

Charles Easton Spooner, engineer of the Festiniog Railway, drew up plans for New Market Square (now The Square) and its associated streets in 1876–77. Development appears to have proceeded slowly, as the Ordnance Survey map of 1887 shows the square still in the process of being laid out with only the north side, and two small blocks to the east and west built, together with Bowydd Calvinistic Methodist Chapel (1882) to the south. The park in the square itself was probably completed in the 1890s, and there was another small park on the site of the present supermarket and its car park.

Benar Road, Benar View Terrace (now Towyn Road), and Dorvil Street, Dorvil Road and Bowydd View are all shown on the map of 1887, but, with the exception of Jones Street (where Taliesin Terrace had already been built by 1888),



development south of Dorvil Street comprises social housing of the twentieth century, continuing the grid pattern already established. Dorvil Road almost certainly marks the line of an earlier route from the south (it continues as a footpath to the west of Afon Bowydd and to the former farm of Cefn Bychan), but the rest of this area appears to be laid out with little constraint.

*Top: Housing laid out in the 1880s, following an existing route-way and developing the previously open land around it (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

*Above: Twentieth-century housing extending earlier building lines (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*Above and right:  
Formality of layout and  
larger houses distinguish  
The Square (Crown  
Copyright: RCAHMW).*

### The Character of Building

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The area is entirely residential with the exception of two surviving chapels on Towyn Road and The Square. It incorporates an unusual hierarchy of house-types, ranging from the three-storeyed buildings of The Square, to the distinctive developments on Towyn Road. In Towyn Road the variously single and double-fronted houses are distinguished by bay windows, gables over round-arched windows and, in some cases, by verandas with cast-iron columns, and by small front gardens with cast-iron railings. The Square is a rare example in the town of planned formality, but very little original detail survives, and subsequent change has introduced considerable variation, including the loss of bay windows, the addition of modern renders, and sandblasting.

Elsewhere, there is greater uniformity in the form of the terraces, which are generally in long units of development. Variation comes in plot layout (houses on Towyn Road and Dorvil Street have



front gardens with cast-iron railings), size (mainly height), and in detail (some of the houses on Dorvil Street have bay windows). There is variation especially in the original finish, which encompasses a range of stonework styles including rock-faced rubble and painted coursing on exposed stone. There are also examples of original render, especially on Towyn Road where there is some scribing.





## 2. Church Street

### Historical Background

Church Street probably represents the first axis for the development of settlement following an existing route line. It was originally a track leading to Maenofferen Farm from an early road on the west side of the valley, via the line of Dorvil Road to the site of St David's Church (then occupied by a dwelling called Penrhos-bach), and thence over the pass to Dolwyddelan. In 1818, this track was linked through to existing roads to the east (the present Four Crosses), creating a convenient axis for the development of settlement. There is, however, no evidence of building earlier than 1841, when the church and former rectory were built and established by Mrs Oakeley of Tan y Bwlch. The former National School also dates from the 1840s, and it is possible that some of the housing also dates from this period, though much of the commercial building is clearly later, and probably broadly contemporary with the block of streets to the south, which were laid out in 1874. At the eastern end of Church Street, Diffwys Square became established as the natural centre of the town, with a secondary focal point at the western limit of the street, marked by the marketplace and market hall of 1861. Beyond this originally lay the terminus station of the main London and North Western Railway.

### The Character of Building

Church Street is part of the main ribbon of development forming the backbone of the town,

close to the former Central and Duffws stations on the Festiniog Railway, which itself acted as an urban hub. Development is strongly commercial, interspersed with civic and social buildings as well as some domestic property. Isallt is a rare example of a large detached villa, built to face the view and with its back to the street, but most development is firmly oriented to the street in a continuous building line. Informal terraces are often assembled from short units of development or even single buildings. This piecemeal pattern is reinforced by the considerable variety in the design and detail of individual buildings. One of the most architecturally flamboyant buildings in the town is the former Cocoa Rooms, but there are other good examples of distinctive commercial building (typically three-storeyed), including: Y Cwm (The Commercial), with its gabled dormers and oversailing eaves; The Co-op of 1883; and several other shops, some of which retain original shop fronts (Nos 1 and 2, for example). Materials and finish are also varied, ranging from the large squared stone blocks used in the former vicarage (Tan y Maen), Y Cwm and the former British School, to the renders which are typical of the commercial buildings.

By contrast, the area between Church Street and the Festiniog Railway was developed with uniform terraced housing in 1874. The strong uniformity of these streets is beginning to be marred by the introduction of render and by the use of sandblasting, but continuous roof lines that retain chimneys are a strong feature of these streets.

*Top left: Y Cwm (The Commercial), with its distinctive form and large stonework blocks, is a prominent feature of the townscape (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

*Above: Church Street in its heyday (© The Francis Frith Collection).*



*Above: Characteristic linear development along High Street (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

*Right and bottom right: Variety of detail is characteristic of commercial buildings in the town centre (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

### 3. High Street and Summerhill

#### Historical Background

High Street extends eastward from Diffwys Square to the boundary with Bethania, intersected by the junction of Lord Street and Cwm Bowydd Road at Four Crosses. Like Church Street, High Street is essentially ribbon development following the road, with discrete areas of housing to either side of it. The road was only established following the start of serious quarrying: its line from Diffwys Square to Four Crosses is early nineteenth century, and was in existence by 1818. The line west of Four Crosses to Tan y Manod was completed in 1825. Some of the housing in this area may have been built shortly after this date, but most of it dates from the 1870s and 1880s. West of Four Crosses, the mainly commercial development is largely late nineteenth-century in character, and the housing developments in the streets to the south of High Street date from the 1870s. Summerhill and Mount Pleasant also date from this period.





## The Character of Building

West of Four Crosses, there is a piecemeal pattern of building. The continuous terraces are assembled as a series of individual developments, with a rich variety of finish. The civic and commercial hub of the town is at Diffwys Square; here, The Queen's Hotel and its neighbours are real town-centre buildings of considerable scale, and there are other examples of distinctive commercial architecture, such as Britannia Chambers with its elements of art deco. In this area, the buildings are relatively large-scale, many of them three-storeyed, often with high upper floors (the principal living accommodation associated with the shops). These commercial buildings are also often distinguished by flamboyant detailing including oriel windows, dormer gables, and terracotta or timber cornices. There is a particularly good example at 4 Newborough Street, with high-quality art-nouveau detail in its shopfront.

After the junction with Glynllifon Street, the buildings are generally more modest in both scale and detail. East of Four Crosses, there is a little more commercial property, but the general character is residential. On the south side, the first terrace may date to about 1830–50: it is an unusual example of a two-unit plan, double-fronted house. Beyond this, the single-fronted terraced house predominates, with some variation in scale and also in stone treatment and finish.

To the south of High Street, Newborough Street and Glynllifon Street cross the railway and link this area with Maenofferen. They are largely uniform developments of the 1870s, with variations in stonework treatment and some loss of detail in recent renewal work, including the removal of chimneys and the introduction of modern render.

Summerhill is a small planned development, with small variations in the scale of housing. Nearby are two examples of the gabled villa type of house.



*An unusual double-fronted terrace on High Street (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*The uniformity of 1870s housing development is eroded by modern render (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*A small planned development at Summerhill (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*Summerhill in about 1875 (The National Library of Wales).*



*Above: Yr Unicorn, an unusual cottage development by the Glynllifon estate (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

*Top and middle right: In terraces of uniform plan, variations in the character of the stonework clearly stand out (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

*Right: The variation in the scale and finish of terraces on Lord Street show how development was organized as a series of small-scale building projects (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

## 4. Diffwys Square and Lord Street

### Historical Background

Diffwys Square was a convergence point for railways coming down inclined planes from Maenofferen and Diffwys Quarries, to the terminus of the Festiniog Railway, but development here was beginning even before the railway arrived in 1836. Yr Unicorn is the sole survivor of a series of cottages built on land belonging to the Glynllifon estate in 1825. Following the arrival of the railway, Dolgarregddu Terrace was built in 1838–39, but much of the other housing in this area dates from the 1870s. Lord Street follows the line of the road to Lord Quarry, connecting the eponymous quarry with a route down the valley to the quays at Maentwrog. The quarry road was established in the early years of the nineteenth century, but there is no evidence that it was developed for housing before about 1860–70; Capel Seion was built in 1864. Park Square was developed in an odd space between Lord Street and the south-east side of Diffwys Square, further constrained by the line of an aqueduct carrying the Afon Bowydd. Housing on Park Square was built in the 1870s, but the former County Police buildings were not built until 1902.



### The Character of Building

There has been some clearance and replacement of housing on the north-west side of Diffwys Square, but Dolgarregddu Terrace survives, albeit much altered: its houses each have a two-unit plan with central doorway and asymmetrical placing of windows. The later housing consistently adopted a single-unit plan form of greater regularity. There are important variations in stonework treatment and in plot layout: Geuftron Terrace, for example, has long front gardens, with some sawn-slate outbuildings and slate-pillar fences. Yr Unicorn is a very rare example of an experimental form of model housing, designed originally as a cluster of four dwellings around a central chimney. Variations in the scale and finish of houses on Lord Street clearly show how



development was organized as a series of relatively small-scale building projects. By contrast, Park Square appears to be a single development, perhaps more directly controlled by the landowners — the Glynllifon estate; where original detail survives, the houses have all the hallmarks of estate cottages.

## 5. Maenofferen

### Historical Background

This area was originally farmland associated with Maenofferen Farm. The farm itself was apparently burnt down in the nineteenth century, but lay immediately west of the present Maenofferen Street, to the rear of what is now Fairview on Wynne Road. Maenofferen Street almost certainly represents the original access to Maenofferen Farm: it was part of a track leading via the line of Church Street from an early road on the west side of Cwm Bowydd. Some houses are aligned with the Festiniog Railway, presumably built before the area began to be more systematically developed for housing in the 1870s, when Maenofferen Street and Bowydd Road were laid out. Elsewhere, development was more piecemeal. Although Mills Row, Oxford Terrace and Picton Terrace are all shown on the 1888 Ordnance Survey map, it was only after this date that Wynne Road was established, carved across pre-existing boundaries to link The Square with Bowydd Road, thereby lending some coherence to this area. As a relatively large area of amenable level ground, this area was chosen for Ysgol y Moelwyn and the former Central School, as well as for the Memorial Hospital in 1924. There has also been some modern housing development on the north side of Wynne Road.

### Character of Building

The area has varied character, partly in consequence of its piecemeal and protracted development. Bowydd Road represents a coherent development of semi-detached houses, which are amongst the largest in the town, spaciouly laid out with large gardens. Oxford Terrace, Picton Terrace and Mills Row are also distinguished by the size of their plots; some of their detached gardens have slate-pillar fence



*Typical terraced houses with distinctive stonework finish (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*The use of brick dressings distinguishes housing on Wynne Road (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*Larger houses spaciouly laid out on Bowydd Road (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

boundaries. Housing in Maenofferen Street is more closely built with the typical single-unit plan houses that are so characteristic of the town. On Wynne Road, a similar plan is adopted, but rock-faced stone and brick dressings distinguish the later development here. Notwithstanding limited use of brick for building here, stone dominates and was even used for facing in semi-detached houses of the 1920s and 1930s.



*Above: Old and new terraced houses in Cwm Bowydd (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*Above right: Roadside development at Bethania in the 1870s (The National Library of Wales).*

## 6. Bethania and Mount Pleasant

### Historical Background

The area developed on the framework of roads that were established to link Diffwys Quarry with an existing road at Congl y Wal, and thence with the wharves at Maentwrog. The very straight road north from Congl y Wal through Manod certainly has the character of a new road of the nineteenth century, but the steeper section past Pant yr Ynn takes a more meandering course. It is possible that the quarry road incorporated an earlier route here, originally connecting farms with their upland grazing. On this line, the name given to the small settlement of Hafod Ruffydd suggests a pre-industrial land use. The quarry road was joined to other through-routes at Four Crosses in 1825, but development along it was slow in coming. Some of the cottage rows below Pant yr Ynn are of an early character, with their two-unit plans and irregular patterns of openings, and they may be amongst the first developments in the area. Pant yr Ynn was built as a slab mill in 1846; located alongside the quarry road, and with good waterpower potential, it was a strategic location for a working building. Most of the housing stock along the main road dates from the 1870s and 1880s.

Away from the roads, this area retains a rural character, with a pattern of small fields between Pen y Bryn and Mount Pleasant, and the footpath that meanders past Fuchswen with its small cottages, to Summerhill. The farm of Gelli, below the road, was the nucleus for the development of Diffwys Quarry in the 1760s, and Pen y Bryn above it is another important link to an agricultural land use perhaps predating the development of quarrying. The lower slopes of the valley also retain their agricultural character, notwithstanding the small development of houses of about 1870–80 (Bron-dwrydd), the pattern of short linear rows being successfully echoed in mid-twentieth-century housing.

The role of chapels in providing a nucleus for settlement is also clear in this area, both at Bethania (the chapel itself now demolished) and also at Mount Pleasant, where a small housing development grew up around Capel Tabernacl.

Pengwyndwn and Maes y Plas are twentieth-century developments of social housing, which highlights the limited scale of any development in Blaenau after about 1900.





*Limewash and rough stonework boundary walls (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

## The Character of Building

Much of the settlement adheres to the main road and comprises terraces of the standard single-unit plan, with small variations in size, scale and detail (for example, the use of arched heads to windows at Gwesty'r Manod, and of bay windows).

Distinctions are strongest in the use of stone, showing clearly how single terraces were sometimes built by several builders. The earliest rows are between Tan y Manod and Pant yr Ynn, distinctive for their small scale, asymmetrical façades, and the remains of a thin render and limewash. Isfryn Terrace is a rare exception to the standard terraced house frontage, with its dormer gables. Many terraces have small front gardens or yards, and the varied treatment of their retaining walls and boundaries is also an important component of character here. The longer gardens at Isfryn Terrace retain some slate-pillar fences, and the footpath from Mount Pleasant to Hafod Ruffydd retains slate and stone slab fencing. Buildings at Fuchswen have a vernacular character.



*Larger terraced houses with bay windows (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*Slate-pillar fences and picturesque detail at Isfryn Terrace (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*Typical terraced housing along Manod Road (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*Linear development along the main road at Manod (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

## 7. Manod, Congl y Wal and Cae Clyd

### Historical Background

Congl y Wal and Manod form a linear settlement along the main road, with a small area of development between the road and the railway. An early road north from Llan Ffestiniog passed via Congl y Wal before taking a lower route up Cwm Bowydd to Pont Frongoch. This was probably part of a network of pre-industrial routes, including the road at Tyddyn Gwyn, which crosses the railway line and continues alongside field boundaries to form part of the longer north-south route. The modern road from Congl y Wal to Tan y Manod was established in 1801 as part of the Diffwys partners' road from Diffwys Quarry to Maentwrog. The road that runs south-west from Congl y Wal was established in the 1820s, and the railway (originating as a branch of the Festiniog Railway to Llan Ffestiniog) was constructed in 1868.

With one or two exceptions at Congl y Wal, where there may be some earlier development, most of

the housing here dates from the 1870s and 1880s. The original Bethesda Calvinistic Methodist Chapel was established in 1819, and a more substantial building provided in 1848, suggesting that there may have been some housing in the vicinity by that time. Some of the area formed part of the Tan y Manod estate, which was the first to introduce building leases on its land. Limited modern development is confined to a small series of private developments close to the railway line below Ysgol Manod, and infill development on the site of the school at Llwyn Hir.

Cae Clyd is also essentially a linear settlement, but its meandering lines and the survival of small fields in the vicinity suggest that the settlement originated as small-scale speculations in the mid-late nineteenth century, alongside an earlier track serving farms further to the east. There has been some late twentieth-century building within former fields to the south of the road.

The immediate area surrounding the settlement retains its pre-industrial pattern of small fields, which is an important foil to the essentially linear character of the industrial settlement itself.





*Far left: Typical single-fronted terraced houses, with long front gardens (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

*Left: A terraced house, rare in retaining original detail (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*Contrasting scales of terraced housing (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



## The Character of Building

*Spacious layouts at Tyddyn Gwyn (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

Most of the housing along the main road comprises terraced rows of single-fronted houses, with minor variations in plot layout, size and scale, and the detailed use of materials. At Congl y Wal, the units of development are generally smaller, with more visible variety in the phases of building and their scale. Nos 166–171 Manod Road are much smaller in scale with varied plans, and may represent early development here. The earliest building in the area is probably 64 Manod Road, which served as the minister's house to the original Bethesda Calvinistic Methodist Chapel built in 1819. In contrast to most of the housing stock here, it has a two-unit plan more often associated with rural vernacular traditions. Later housing at Glan y Wern is distinguished by its more spacious layout, with long front gardens; the houses are built with rock-faced rubble combined with yellow brick dressings. At Tyddyn Gwyn, there is a single row of larger houses, with round-arched windows in gabled dormers.

*Wide windows with brick dressings are hallmarks of housing at Tyddyn Gwyn (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



*Distinctive larger housing at Tyddyn Gwyn (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*



Cae Clyd comprises a more piecemeal and informal development pattern, though the buildings themselves largely conform to the terraced house-type which is characteristic of Blaenau. More recent development adjacent to the railway marks a departure from the traditional terraced form, with a more random alignment of buildings.



*Above: Rhiwbryfdir, overshadowed by quarrying, about 1875 (The National Library of Wales).*

*Right: Capel Rhiw, about 1875 (The National Library of Wales).*

## 8. Rhiwbryfdir

### Historical Background

Rhiwbryfdir was one of the farms that pre-dated the development of slate quarrying; it was on its land that the first of the three quarries that eventually became the Oakeley Quarry was established in 1819. The farm itself lay just to the west of Pant yr Afon and was buried by slate waste in the 1890s. The distinctive triangle of roads that forms the structure of settlement here was not shown on the Ordnance Survey map of 1839–41, though the main road north probably approximates to the line of the early route over the pass to Dolwyddelan. The meandering line taken by the settlement may suggest that it followed an earlier route of sorts. The hospital was built in 1848, so presumably the road immediately south of it was established at this date. Capel Salem was built in 1861 and Capel Rhiw in 1867–68, so there was already the



nucleus of a settlement by this time, and the presence of the chapels may have stimulated further building in the area.





### The Character of Building

The pattern of development here is largely linear, following the line of the roads, with a tiny bit of infill behind Baltic Road. Development is notably more informal than that of the main settlement of the town and the units of development are generally smaller. Front gardens are common, with varied wall and railing detail. Although many of the terraces conform to the standard single-unit plan, there are some more unusual buildings in the area (examples being: Erw Fair, Dwyrdd Terrace and I Dinas Road), as well as some single-storey cottages on the main road at Llwyn y Gell. This diversity is matched by variety in the use of building materials, including some sawn slate (rare in the town), slate hanging (Erw Wen), and graded slate roofs.

## 9. Tan y Grisiau, Glan y Pwll and Oakeley Square

### Historical Background

Tan y Grisiau was a small estate, leased from 1823 by Samuel Holland of the Welsh Slate Company.



Holland was the promoter of the Festiniog Railway, which opened in 1836, and is known to have been an enthusiastic builder of houses: by 1845, forty-two dwellings had been built, along with three chapels. The Cwmorthin Quarry also erected houses in this area in the 1830s, and provided a reading room, which (converted into housing) survives just above the railway. Early development followed the railway and included several single-storey cottages, some of which survive. The railway was soon supplanted by roads as the framework for the growth of settlement; a road up the valley to Tan y Grisiau was built in the 1820s, and Tan y Grisiau was connected to Glan y Pwll by Samuel Holland, probably in the 1830s. The parish adopted the road through Tan y Grisiau in 1854 and, until the creation of the A496 in the 1960s, it was the main axis on the west side of the valley, and settlement largely followed it. Although there are some pre-1850 buildings, most date from the 1860s and 1870s. The steep road down from Cwmorthin Quarry also provided a focus for settlement in the same period.

Oakeley Square was an attempt to break away from the resolutely linear pattern of settlement here. It was not started until the 1890s and was never completed.

*Top left: Original detail surviving on a building behind Capel Rhiw (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

*Above: Tan y Grisiau in June 1954, before the A496 was created, strung out along road and railway (Crown Copyright: MOD).*



*Above: Linear development patterns at Tan y Grisïau (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

*Right and below right: Typical terraced housing (Crown Copyright: RCAHMW).*

### The Character of Building

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Under the auspices of Samuel Holland, Tan y Grisïau began to be developed as early as the 1830s, and its longer development history has contributed to its distinctive character. Although the standard Blaenau terraced house-type of the 1860s and 1870s is dominant, there are several departures from it, including some much smaller units of development, and also a more consciously picturesque terrace at Glan yr Afon Terrace. Most of the housing is set back with short front gardens and their boundary walls and railings are an important component of their character:





# Statement of Significance

Blaenau Ffestiniog is a remarkably well-defined nineteenth-century industrial town. Over the course of that century the area was transformed by slate quarrying from upland grazing into a major town, but the rapid growth of the boom years was not sustained in the twentieth century, and the character laid down in just a few decades continues to this day. Perched on a natural shelf encircling the head of the Vale of Ffestiniog, and overshadowed by the raw beauty of the quarries, the town could hardly have a more distinctive topographical character. Essentially linear, the pattern of settlement is structured by networks of road and railway, created to serve the transport needs of the quarries. Underlying it are traces of a pre-industrial landscape that was never entirely effaced. These include a mesh of paths and tracks, as well as field patterns and farmsteads. In the abrupt transition from a rural to an urban landscape graphically rests the history of transformation, which is the essence of the industrial revolution.

Its short chronology of development has given Blaenau Ffestiniog an unusual coherence, and the character and composition of an industrial town

are here revealed with exceptional clarity. Cultural and economic aspiration is displayed in the architectural variety of its commercial buildings, and in the ambition of its schools and chapels. By contrast, the housing stock seems remarkably uniform, until a series of subtle distinctions is recognized: small differences in size and scale, variations in the way building materials were used and finished, and in plot layouts and their boundaries. It was by these means that urban society was differentiated in the nineteenth century, and they remain important components of character today. Sustaining local distinctiveness means being alive to the significance of these minor variations.

Blaenau Ffestiniog slate roofed the world, and the town faced out to global markets via the transport links that made its development possible. The town itself, however, has a strong local character derived from its remarkable position, and from the extensive use of local materials contrived to express all the nuances of a working community. It is this local character combined with a global outlook that gives Blaenau Ffestiniog its unique place in the world.

# Selected Sources

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### Gwynedd Archaeological Trust

Historic Environment Records.

## Archival sources

### Bangor University Manuscript Department

Maenan 419.

### Gwynedd Archives

#### Caernarfon Record Office

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'Map of Cwm Bowydd and Maeny Feram Farm situate in North Wales'; undated, but from between 1773 and 1777, as the adjacent Gelli land is identified as the property of Sir George Warren (XD2A/1559).

Map of Llechwedd Quarry, Llechwedd y Cyd, Llwyn y Gell and Ffridd Blaen Llechwedd, 1884 (XD8/4/1058).

Map of Vale of Ffestiniog 1813, showing proposed and actual roads and railways (XD2A/387).

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C. E. Spooner, Plan of proposed development at New Market Square and adjacent streets, 1876 (XD2A/407).

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# Appendix I

## The Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales (RCAHMW): Survey and Archive of Blaenau Ffestiniog.

The National Monuments Record of Wales (NMRW) holds the national collection of archives for the built heritage of Wales, including survey drawings, photographic surveys, aerial photographs, maps, reports and historical archive material. Information on the sites and buildings in Blaenau Ffestiniog listed below is available through the RCAHMW's free online database, Coflein — [www.coflein.gov.uk](http://www.coflein.gov.uk)

Alternatively, you can contact RCAHMW's enquiries service:

Library and Enquiries Service  
RCAHMW  
Crown Building  
Plas Crug  
Aberystwyth  
Email [nmr:wales@rcahmw.gov.uk](mailto:nmr:wales@rcahmw.gov.uk)  
Tel 01970 621200

Bethania Welsh Independent Chapel (8369)

Bethesda Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Chapel (8393)

Blaenau Ffestiniog Central Station (41298)

Blaenau Ffestiniog Town (305760)

Bowydd Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Chapel (8394)

Brynbowydd Welsh Independent Chapel (8372)

Bwlch Iocyn (28238)

Cae Canol Mawr (28244)

Cae Du (300116)

Caersalem Baptist Chapel (8382)

Calfaria Welsh Baptist Church (8383)

Congl y Wal Calvinistic Methodist Sunday School (8396)

Craig-Ddu Incline (34932)

Diffwys Railway Station (34934)

Diffwys Slate Quarry (85487)

Ebenezer Wesleyan Methodist Chapel (8415)

English Calvinistic Methodist Chapel (8409)

Ffestiniog Methodist Chapel (8413)

Garregddu Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Chapel (8400)

Gloddfa Ganol, Ffestiniog Quarry, Nos 1–3  
Quarrymen's Cottages (302225)

Gwylfa Calvinistic Methodist Chapel (8402)

Hyfrydfa Welsh Independent Chapel (8377)

Jerusalem Welsh Independent Chapel (8378)

Llechwedd Slate Quarries (400426)

Maenofferen Calvinistic Methodist Chapel (8404)

Maenofferen Slate Quarry (400427)

Moelwyn Fulling Mill, Tan y Grisau (40924)

Moelwyn Petrol Pump (85486)

Oakeley Slate Mine and Quarry (404307)

Pantllwyd Calvinistic Methodist Sunday School (8405)

Pant yr Afon Hydro Electric Power Station  
(85488)

Pant yr Ynn Mill; Manod Woollen Mill (28620)

Pisgah Baptist Chapel (8386)

Rhiw Calvinistic Methodist Chapel (8407)

Salem Welsh Independent Chapel (8380)

Salem Baptist Chapel (8387)

Sardis Baptist Chapel (8388)

Seion Welsh Baptist Chapel (8389)

Soar Baptist Chapel (8390)

Soar Wesleyan Methodist Chapel (8418)

Tabernacle Calvinistic Methodist Chapel (8410)

Tai Unicorn, Unicorn Cottage (28880)

Tan y Manod Hall (28766)

Trefeini Calvinistic Methodist Sunday School  
(8412)

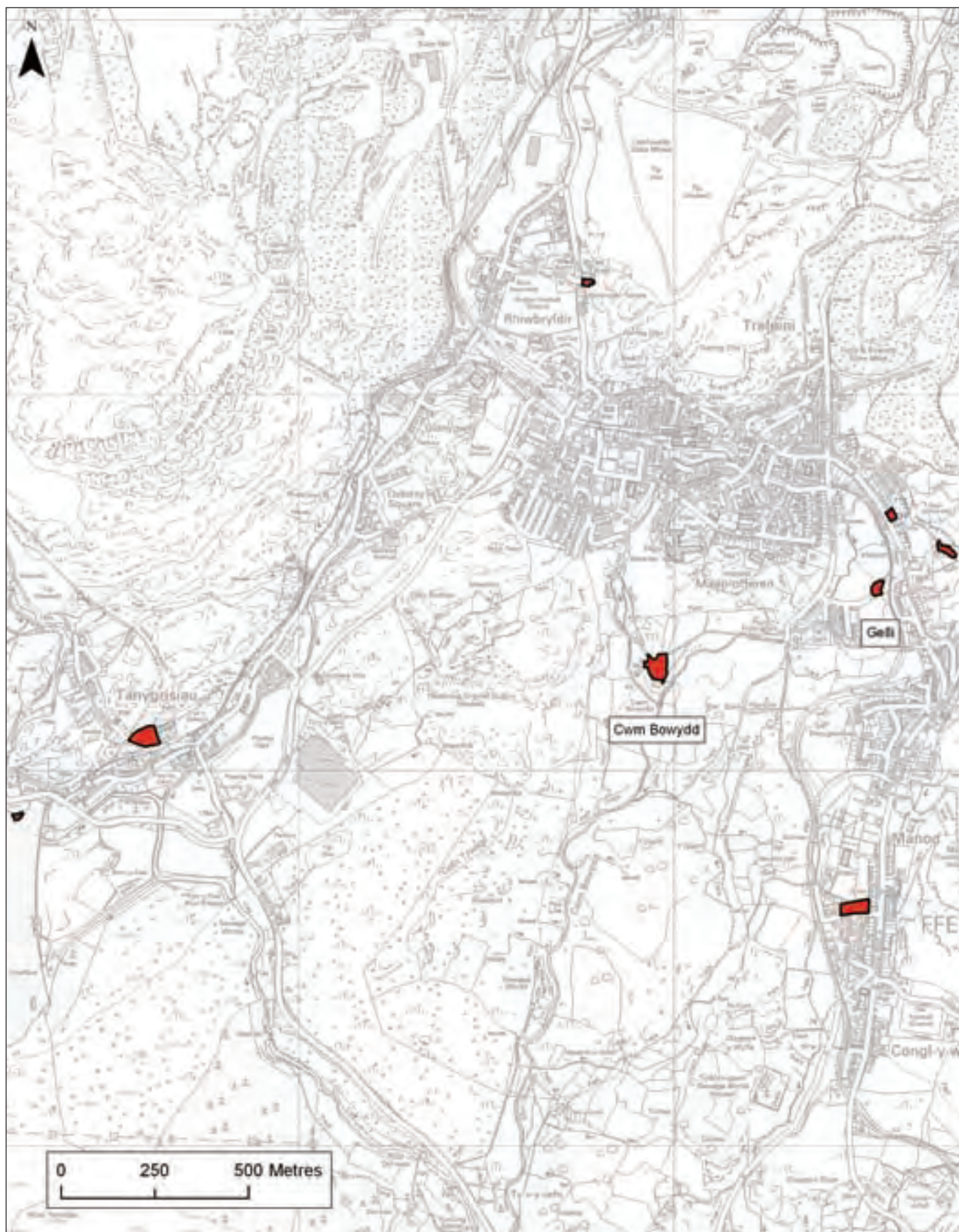
Uwchllaw'r Ffynnon (28882)



# Endnotes

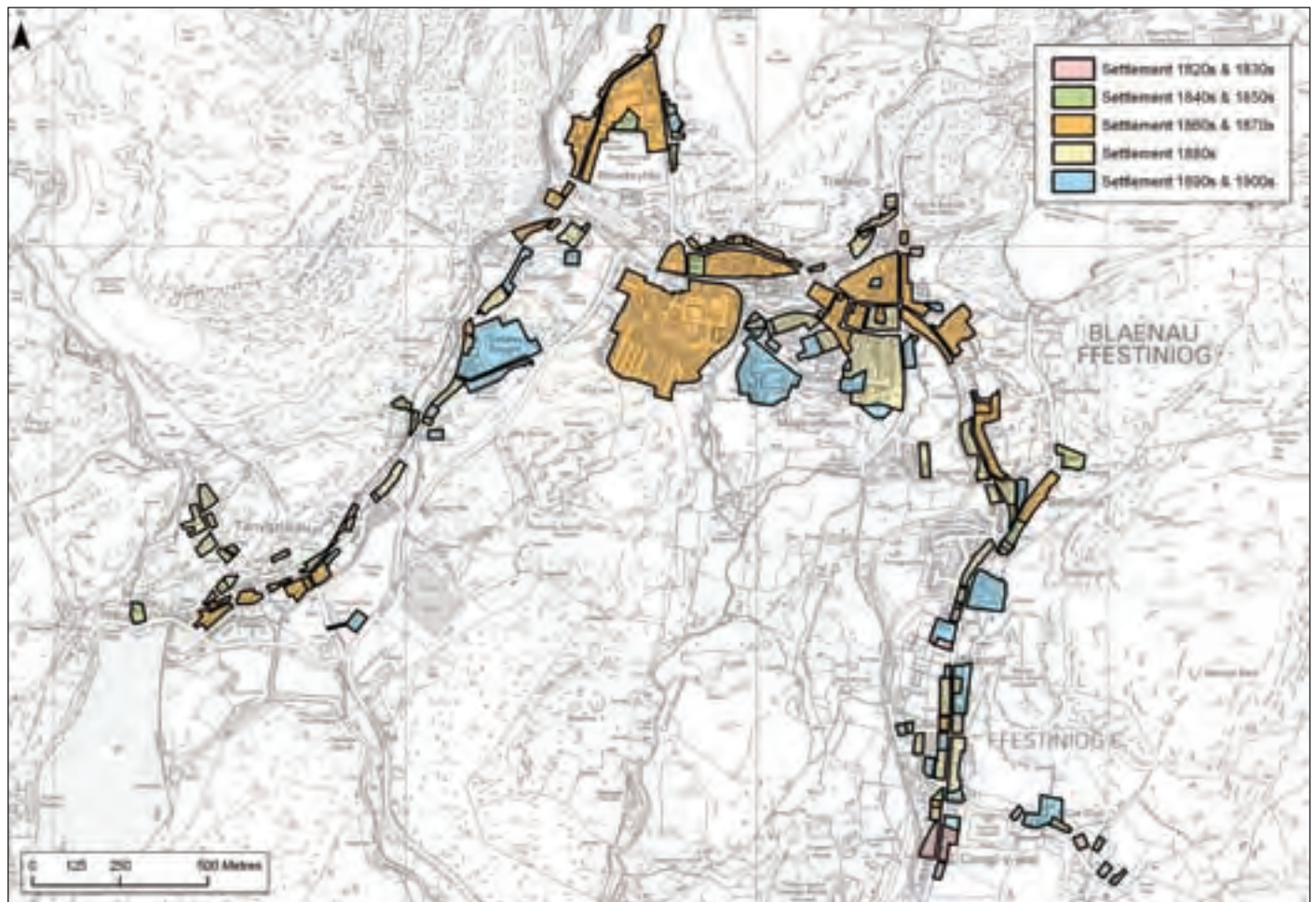
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## I Blaenau Ffestiniog before the Slate Quarries: Pre-Industrial Settlement



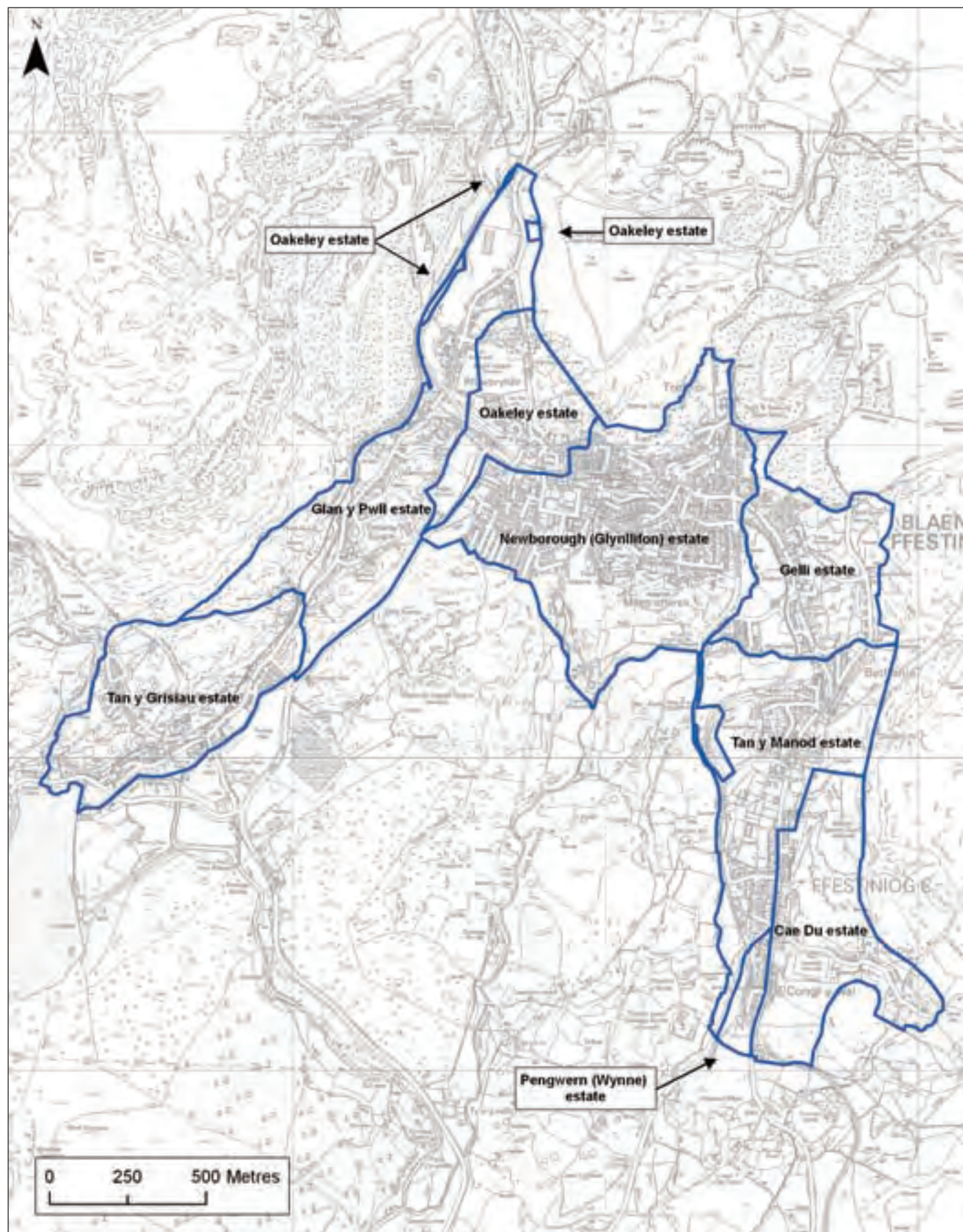


## 2 The Growth of Settlement in Blaenau Ffestiniog



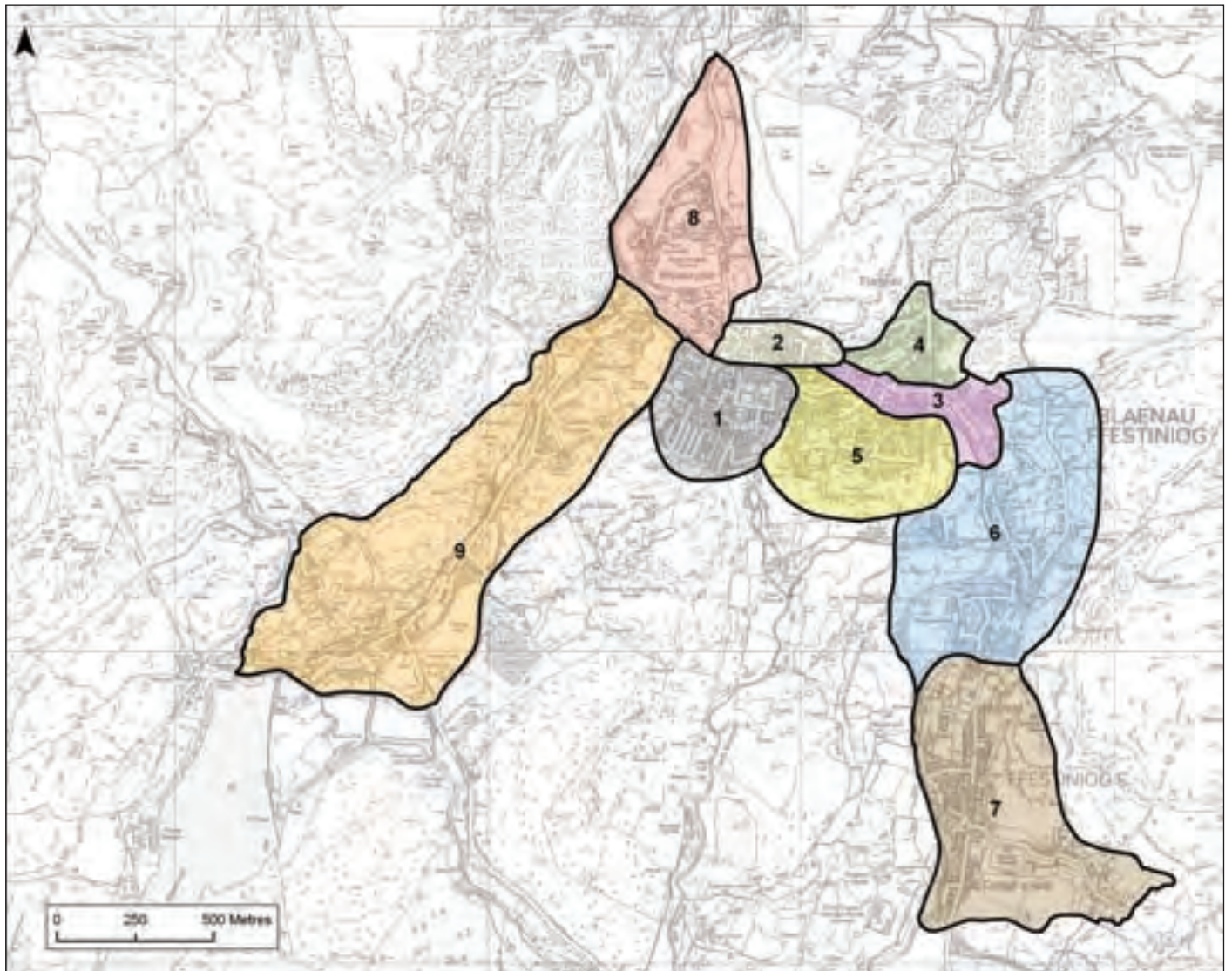


### 3 Blaenau Ffestiniog: Patterns of Landownership

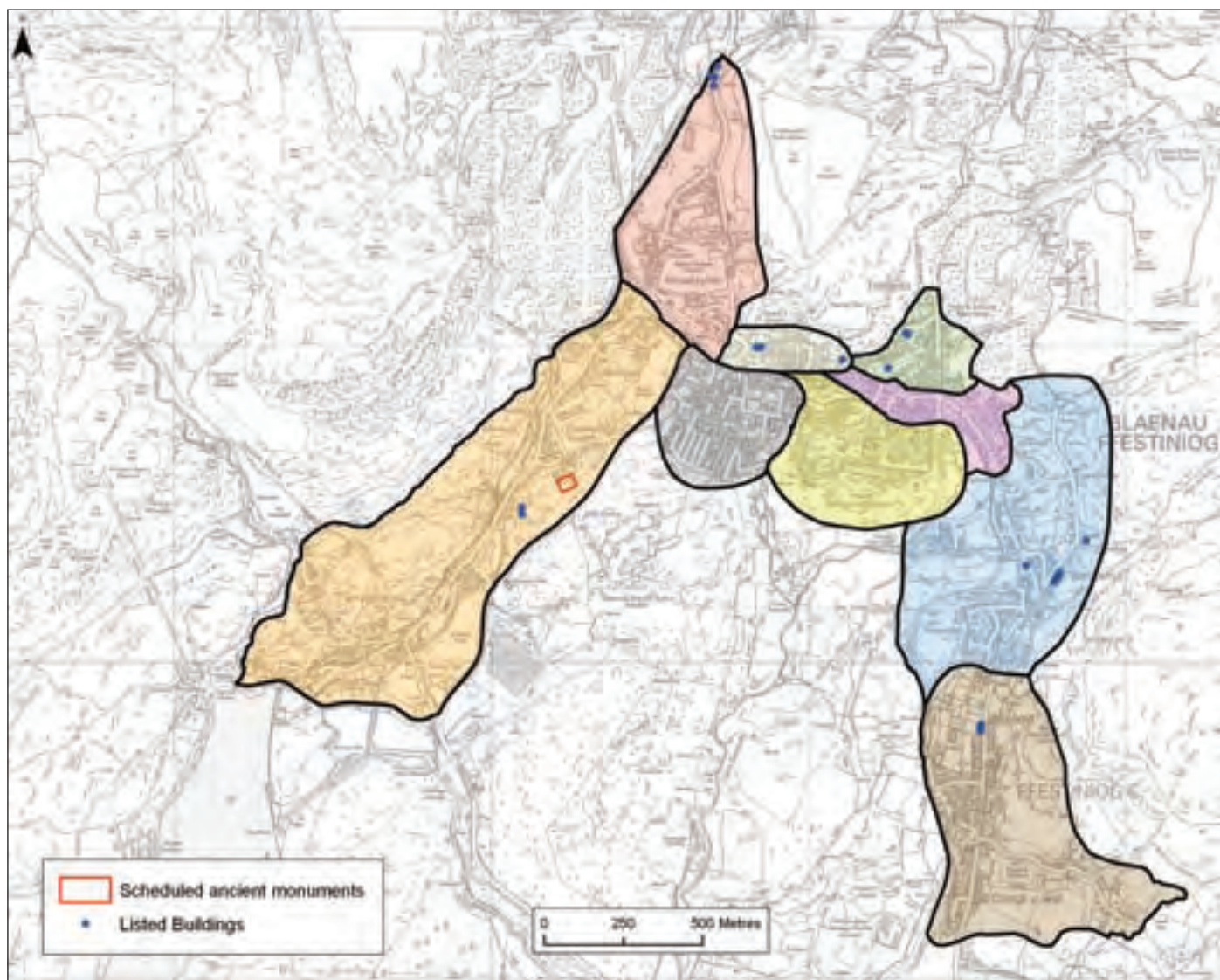




#### 4 All Character Areas



## 5 All Character Areas with Scheduled Ancient Monuments and Listed Buildings



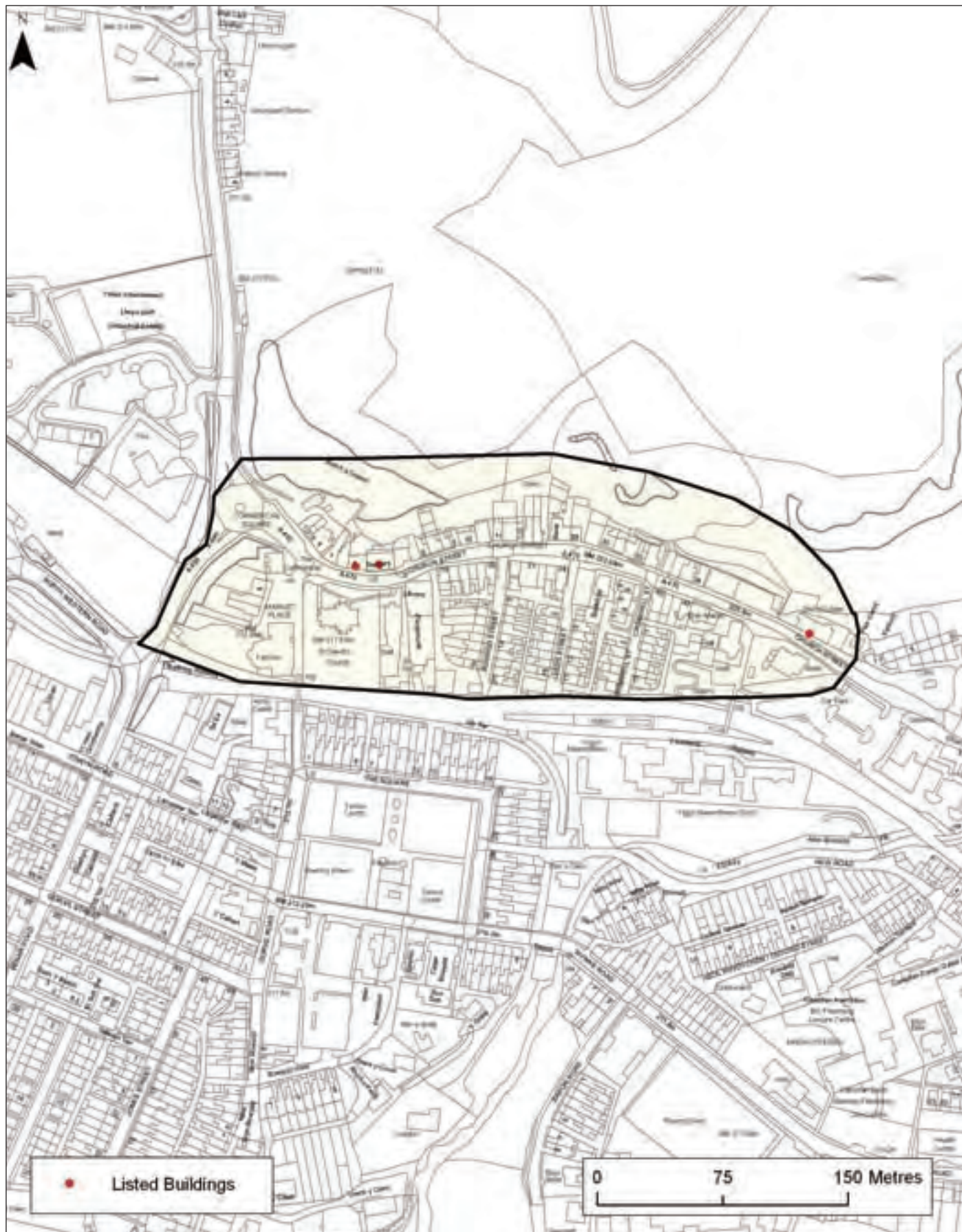


## 6 Benar Road and The Square (I)



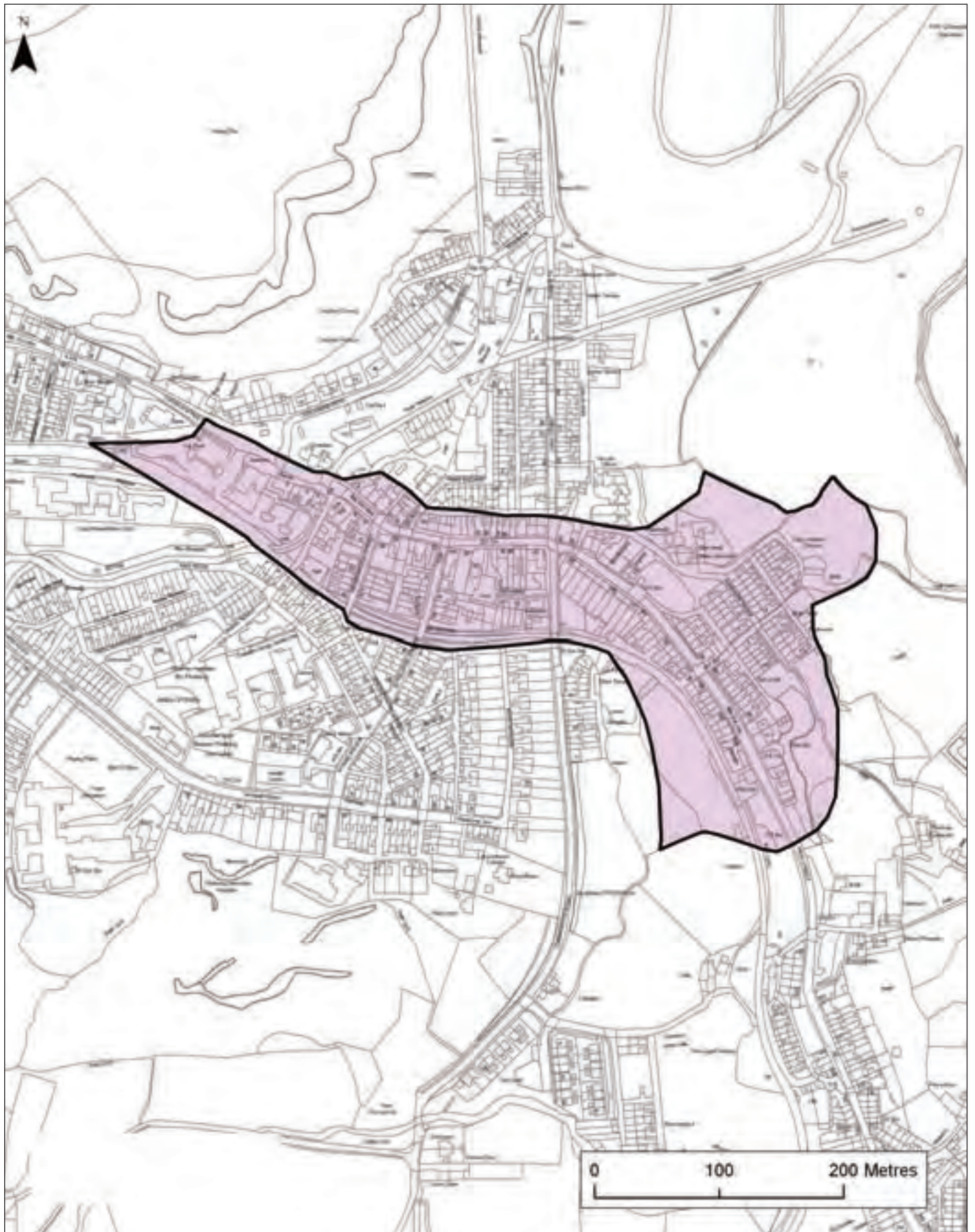


## 7 Church Street (2)





## 8 High Street and Summerhill (3)





## 9 Diffwys Square and Lord Street (4)

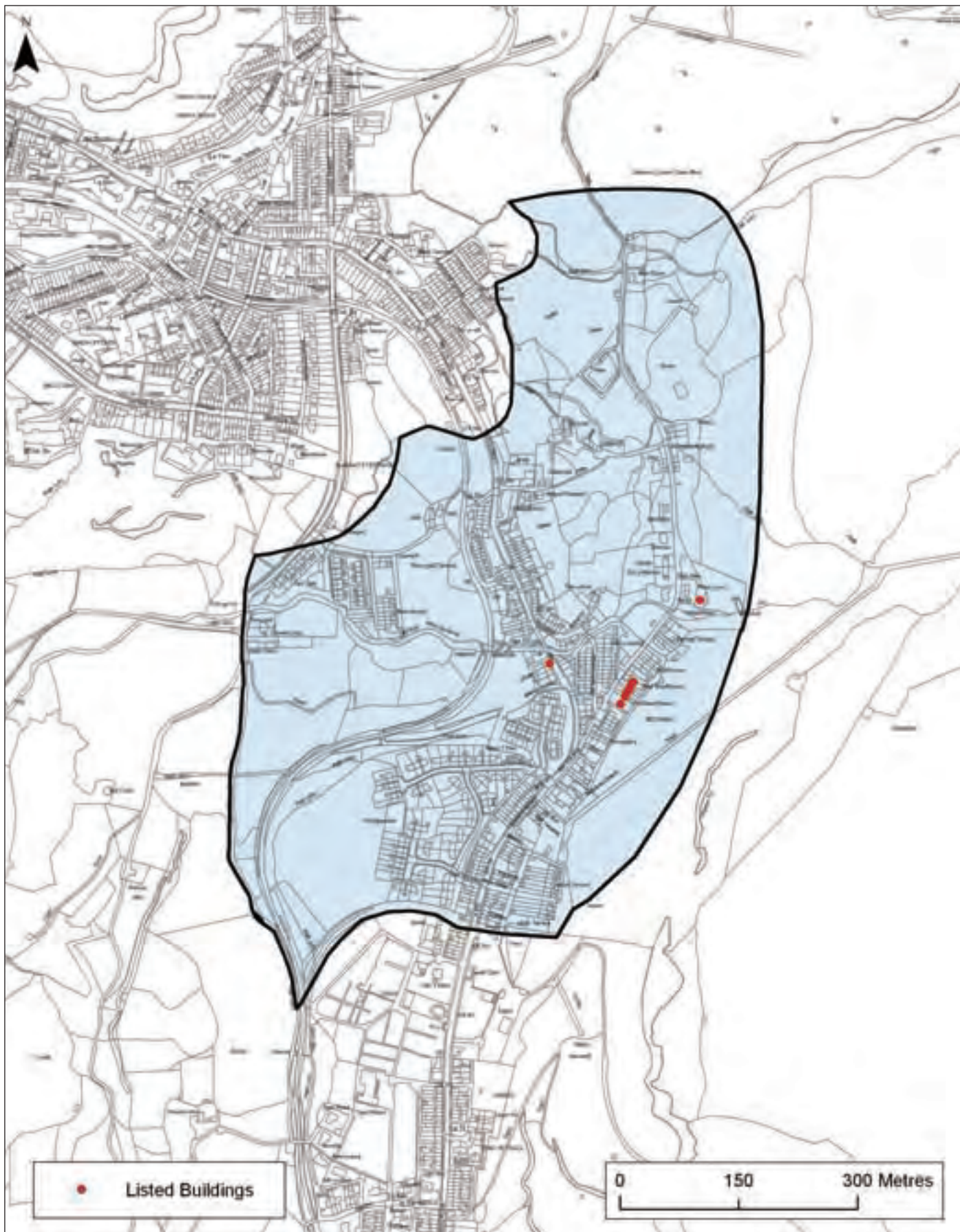




**10** Maenofferen (5)

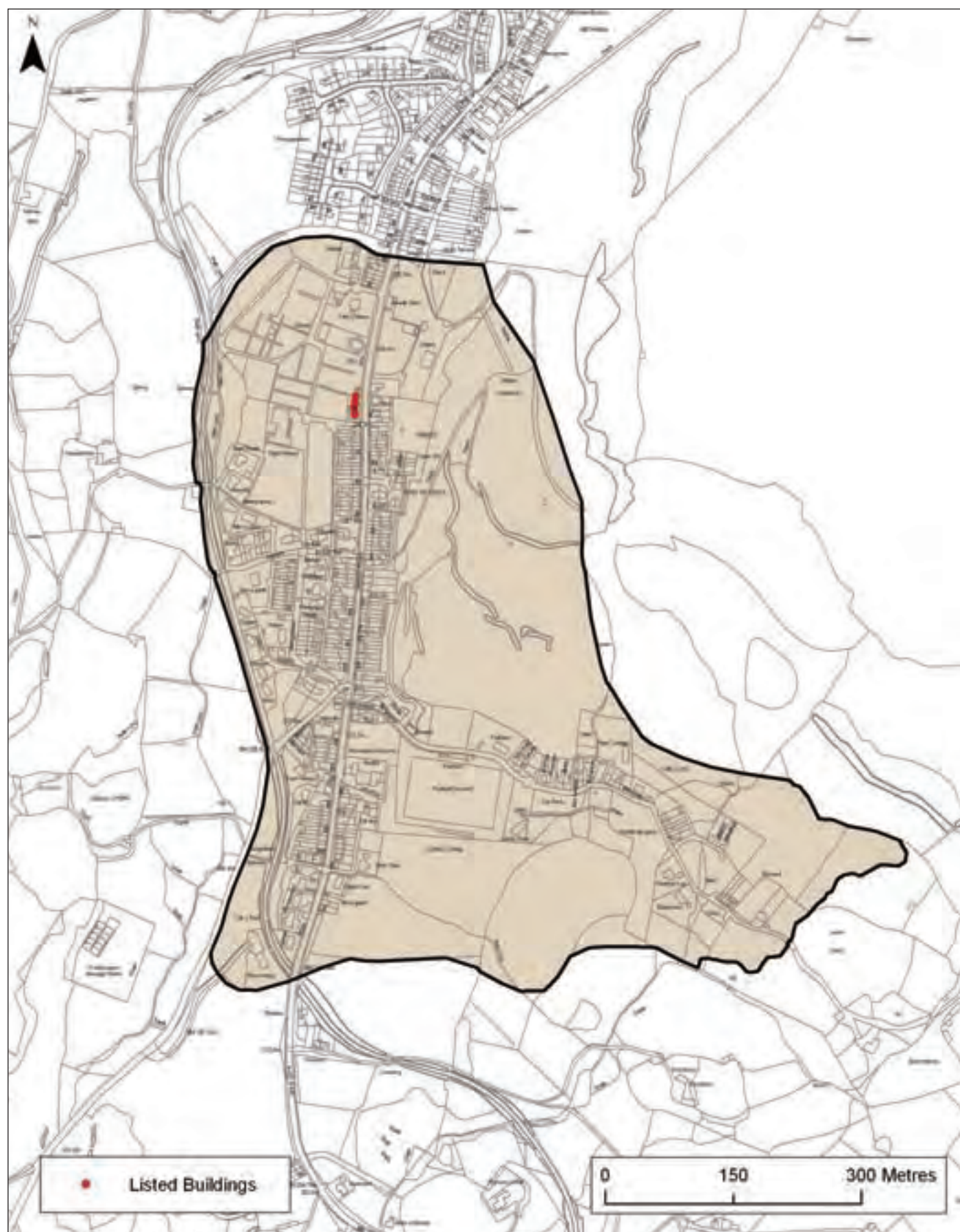


## II Bethania and Mount Pleasant (6)



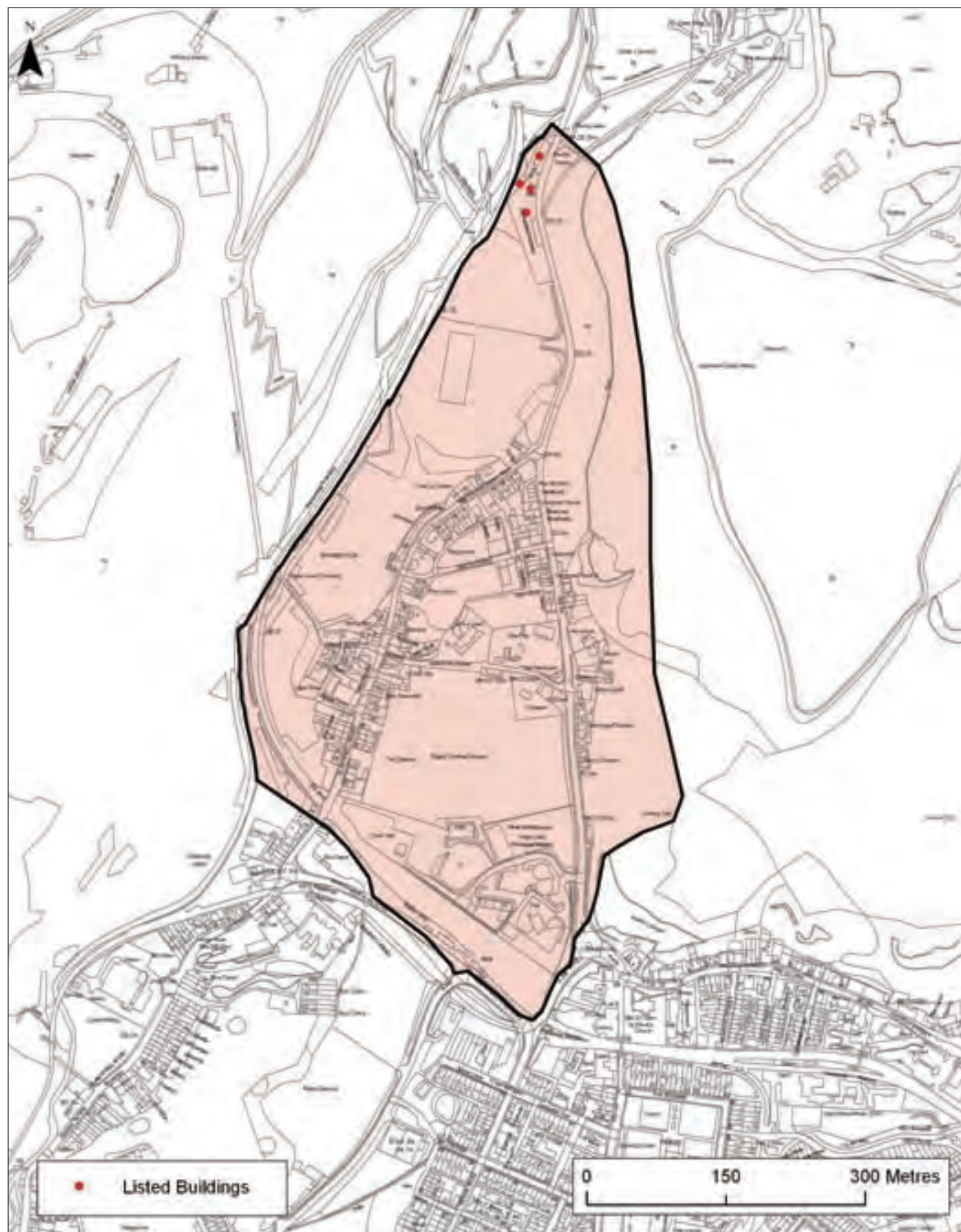


## 12 Manod, Congl y Wal and Cae Clyd (7)

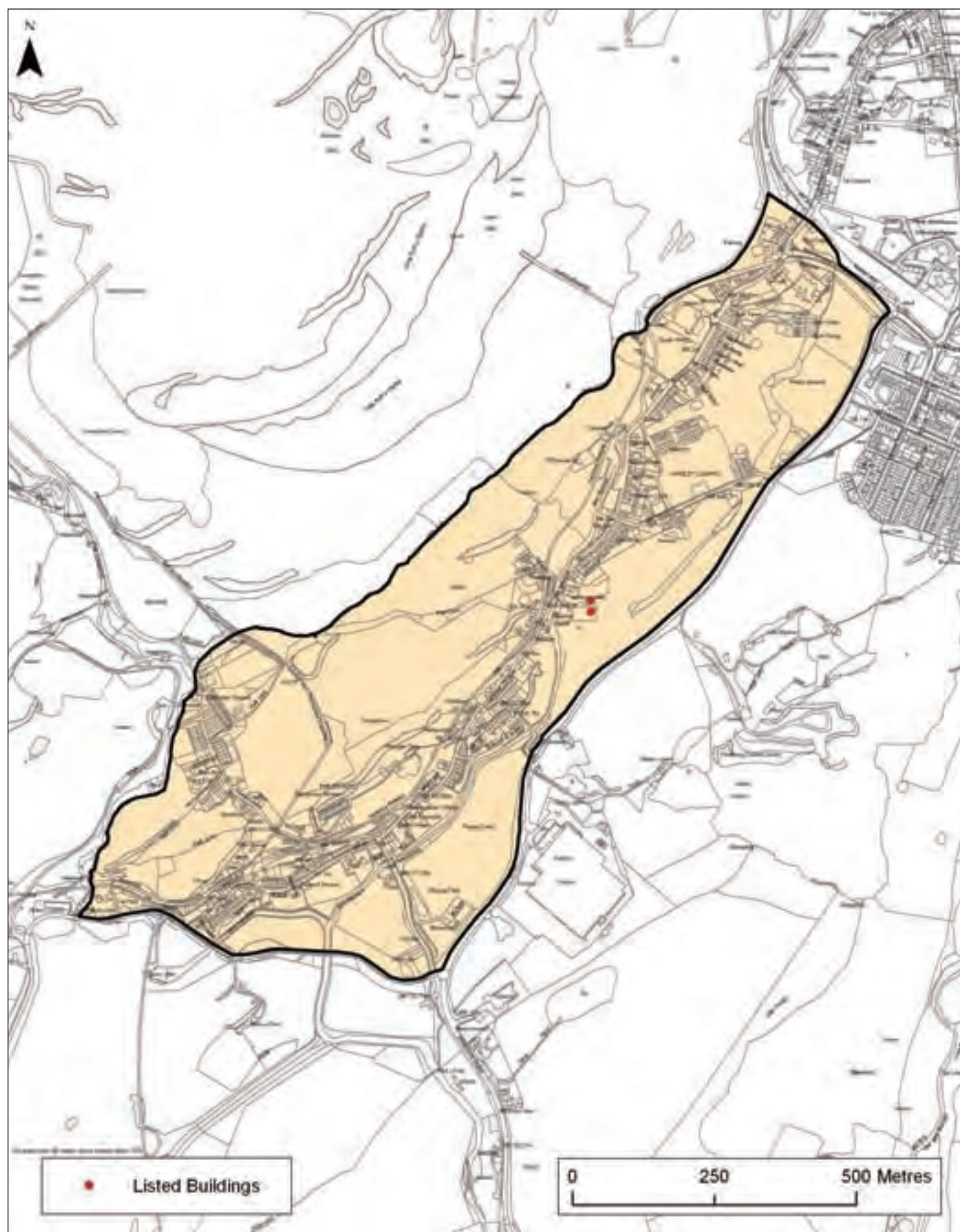




### 13 Rhiwbryfdir (8)





**14** Tan y Grisiau, Glan y Pwll and Oakeley Square (9)







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