

Porthmadog Resurvey

The community conveniently breaks down into two component parts: the towns of Porthmadog, and Tremadog. Since both have quite distinctive histories and character, it makes best sense to consider them separately (though both of course owe their origins to the genius of William Madocks whose reclamation of Traeth Mawr between 1800-11 made the establishment of both possible). Madocks' own house in Porthmadog, known as Morfa Lodge but now Gelli Faia, is listed, as is the house he built at Tremadog (Plas tan yr allt).

Porthmadog is essentially a port town. A deep natural harbour was the felicitous consequence of the construction of the Cob for the reclamation of Traeth Mawr, and Madocks exploited this opportunity by securing an Act of Parliament for the construction of a harbour in 1821. Its success was guaranteed by the rapid development of the North Wales slate industry in this period, and its appetite for transportation: Madocks' first wharf was soon followed by a whole series of other wharves, all built and managed by individual slate companies. The wharves are all listed, together with associated buildings - slate warehouses, wharf managers' houses etc.

Development of the harbour went hand-in-hand with urban development: the wharves formed a nucleus for the early town, which developed around the harbour before it grew along the road-line following the route over the Cob towards the Llyn. The area around the harbour was largely built up in the second quarter of the C19 and still forms a remarkably coherent urban ensemble. It includes some interesting specialist buildings with a maritime connection such as harbour offices, a seamen's newsroom, banks, a sail-loft, a navigation school, as well as shops and houses. The buildings mostly share a strong architectural character, lent by the consistent use of local quarried stone laid in distinctive long blocks. Many also exhibit a strong sense of design (indicative of investment), for example in the balanced composition of Ty Toronto and 2-5 Cornhill. There are also some sophisticated town-houses, including an interesting pair that originally incorporated separate basement dwellings (11-12 Cornhill).

Above the main development, commanding fine views over the harbour and the Traeth to the mountains, Marine Terrace is a mid-century development, comprising a group of substantial houses which adhere to a Georgian tradition. Between the harbour development and the rather later linear building line along the main road, an intended formal development around the park was never completed, but two exceptionally fine houses with Regency character (Greenway and the Mews, Brecon House and Place) were built. These residential developments appear firmly middle-class, a significant characteristic of an urbanised social context.

This urban development was founded on the reclamation of Traeth Mawr. Key components of the original reclamation work are also listed, not least the Cob itself (grade II*), but also the house of its director of works (Plas Ynys Tywyn), Britannia Bridge, which retains the slots for the original tidal gates, and several bridges over the main drainage ditches. The Cob was extended in 1836 by the addition of a road on the inland side, the Ffestiniog railway running on the original embankment.

Porthmadog was also built on the slate industry, and there are many clues as to its importance in the town. Slate had to be brought from the quarries to the harbour: a tramway bridge over y Cyt (the main drainage ditch on Traeth Mawr) which belongs to this wider transport network is listed. (Perhaps the most significant part of this

network was the Ffestiniog railway of 1832-6 - however, the station buildings have been heavily reconstructed and are therefore not recommended for listing). Several buildings make conspicuous use of slate in their design: The Oakleys - a slate shipping manager's house - uses slate hanging decoratively, and Bridge Cottage is a riot of decorative slate-work, including slate-hung chimneys. On High Street, Nos 1-9 are also slate-hung.

Whereas the development of the harbour quarter has a coherent architectural character, what is now the main street of the town is more mixed. It mostly belongs to the mid-late C19, built up in a series of developments adhering to a common building line. Its building traditions are all recognisably urban, though unified development is limited to relatively short rows (the most coherent is Nos 1-9 High Street). Commercial building dominated the main street, typically of 3 storeyed premises comprising shops with accommodation above. Here, the best surviving examples of shop fronts, and a purpose-built bank of 1868 are listed. Kerfoots shop (1874) is exceptional as a substantial multi-storeyed commercial establishment with a large open interior featuring a remarkable free-standing geometrical staircase.

It is notable that outside the immediate environs of the harbour quarter, there was more variety of building styles and materials. Whereas in the harbour area large rectangular blocks of dressed stone were the rule, with render an exception (albeit used to good effect later in such premises as 'The Beehive Establishment on Lombard Street), beyond, exposed stonework was the exception, rather than the rule. Perhaps polite architecture had always favoured the smooth surfaces of render (used in the Regency style houses that fronted the park, and in Madocks' own house), over the robust qualities of local stone. By mid-century, the taste for render had become more widespread, perhaps because it could be used in conjunction with poorer quality stone-work. It was also readily adaptable for decorative finishes, an effect which could only be achieved in stonework at considerable expense: the church, chapels and bank all used a variety of imported stone.

Other key players in the establishment of the town were religious institutions: Capel Salem was founded in 1827, rebuilt in 1841 and again in its present form in 1860. The ambition of this project is demonstrated by the commissioning of a leading chapel architect (Thomas Thomas of Landore), resulting in a building lavish in its scale and quality of finish. Continuing urban growth later in the century is evinced in the provision of the Anglican church (1873) and another major chapel (Eglwys Bresbyteriaidd), rebuilt in 1898.

Porthmadog grew as a commercial centre, but also attracted other industries: the Britannia foundry has been demolished, but a row of workers' houses associated with it (and incorporating detail almost certainly cast in it) do survive. Snowdon Mill was a steam-powered flour mill on an unusually large scale, built in 1862 and subsequently extended.

Behind the main street, there is a network of residential streets of terraced workers' housing. With the exception of the Britannia Foundry cottages, none of this housing (probably mostly built speculatively) is listed. A brief characterisation study of these other parts of the town might be helpful in guiding its longer term conservation management.

Tremadog is a remarkable product of the Enlightenment, a complete planned town, the vision and enterprise of William Madocks, who (having bought the Tan y allt estate in 1798) had reclaimed a large tract of marshland in 1800. Here he planned a small market and post town, with a manufactory, a town hall, market, church and chapel, and housing. All these requisites of an urban settlement had been established by 1810-11, and though the town grew thereafter, it did so largely on lines which had already been determined.

The major institutions of this planned town are all remarkable buildings in their own right. The church pioneered both stylistically (in its use of gothic) and structurally (in the use of artificial stone for spire and gateway); Peniel Chapel (possibly built to Madocks' own designs) was also a pioneer in its use of an accomplished Classicism, and on a remarkable scale. The town hall and market building is also a distinguished work of Neo-classicism, combining the grace of this architectural style with the robust qualities of the local stone. The woollen manufactory opened in 1806, one of the earliest integrated powered woollen mills in Wales, combining carding, spinning and weaving - industrialised processes in a specialist, industrial building accompanied by its own housing (presumably for managers and key-workers).

Around these poles, the town itself was laid out. One axis was provided on what was intended as a part of a new post-route from London-Holyhead via Porthdinllaen (one section of this axis is called Dublin Street). Here was a coaching inn and the market hall, opposite which lay a broad square, from which a further street led to church and chapel. Market hall, inn with its stabling (the latter no longer intact but partially surviving as a pair of houses) and the square in its entirety were built within the first decade. Houses along High Street and Church Street followed rather later (from the 1840s), whilst a row of cottages on Dublin Street were probably the very first to be built, apparently pre-dating the establishment of the planned town. In addition (and somewhat outwith the formal bounds of the town) was a significant development of mid C19 workers' housing (probably associated with quarry workings), a series of terraced cottages now known as Sunnyside.

Building in the square was mostly housing, but there seem to have been some shops from the outset, as well as a public house. The town also had a large granary (a remarkable aisled structure whose basic form is still discernable notwithstanding change of use to a house); eventually, a small lock-up was also provided - this survives more-or-less intact.

The town was virtually entirely built in local stone, often coursed and squared for facing work. With some exceptions where render has been applied later, this use of stone still lends a consistent character. This is notwithstanding not only later change (regrettably there are few original details remaining intact), but also considerable variety in the form and type of house provided from the outset. Thus, although the square is carefully planned, and the facing rows more-or-less balance, the symmetry is not exact. Some of its buildings aspire to a polite Georgian, with bold eaves and even embellishment (eg No 4 Church Street), whilst others are more vernacular in character. On High Street, the terraces are assembled in relatively small units of development (of 2 and 3 houses at a time), varied in width and height. Similarly, of the workers' houses of Sunnyside, some were single-fronted, some double.

This variety may provide a clue to the building process: perhaps a ground plan for the town was laid out, with different builders undertaking different sections of its development as small-scale speculations. This would become a common means of urban building, but such planning was still unusual in the first decades of the C19.

Madocks also built a house for himself, adding to an existing building a Regency villa (Tan yr allt). In 1812, Shelley was living in it (the first of two major literary associations for the town - T.E. Lawrence was born in Snowdon Lodge (formerly Gorphwysfa) in 1886). Dafydd Ellis-Nanney also built a house on the edge of the town - Ty Nanney is a particularly good example of a Regency villa.

In conservation terms, the structure of the town is remarkably intact, and new development on its edge limited in its scale and impact. There has however been a slow loss of detail (the addition of render to some stone cottages, loss of original doors and windows, and unsympathetic replacements), which it is hoped can now be arrested. After years of neglect, there is now a scheme for the restoration of the church, but the Manufactory remains in very poor condition. Tremadog occupies an important position in the histories of town planning, industrialisation and urban building, and it deserves an integrated conservation management that fully reflects its significance. The tools are in place, as virtually all of the historical core of the town is protected by listing.

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