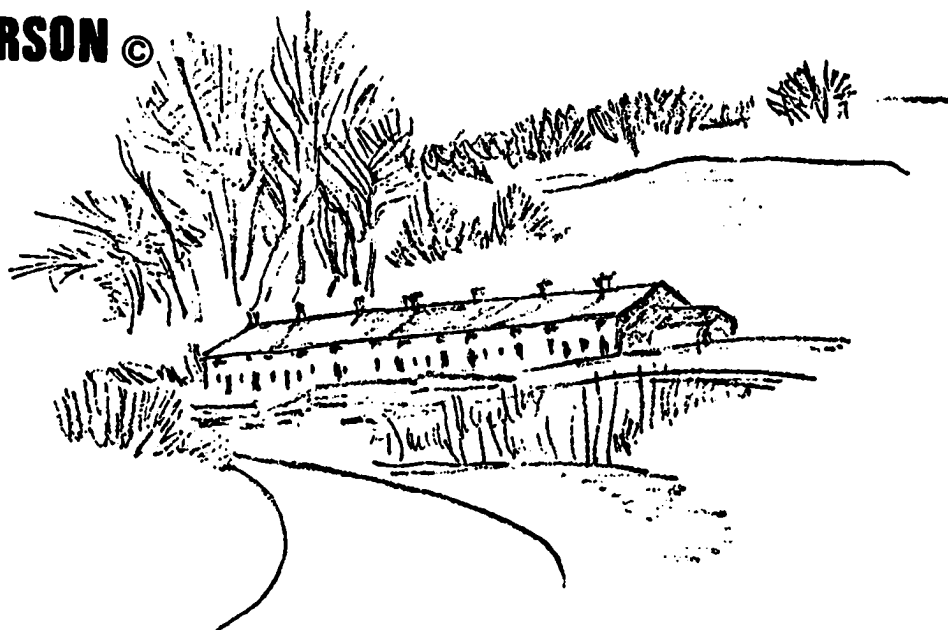


## FORGE ROW PRESERVATION TRUST

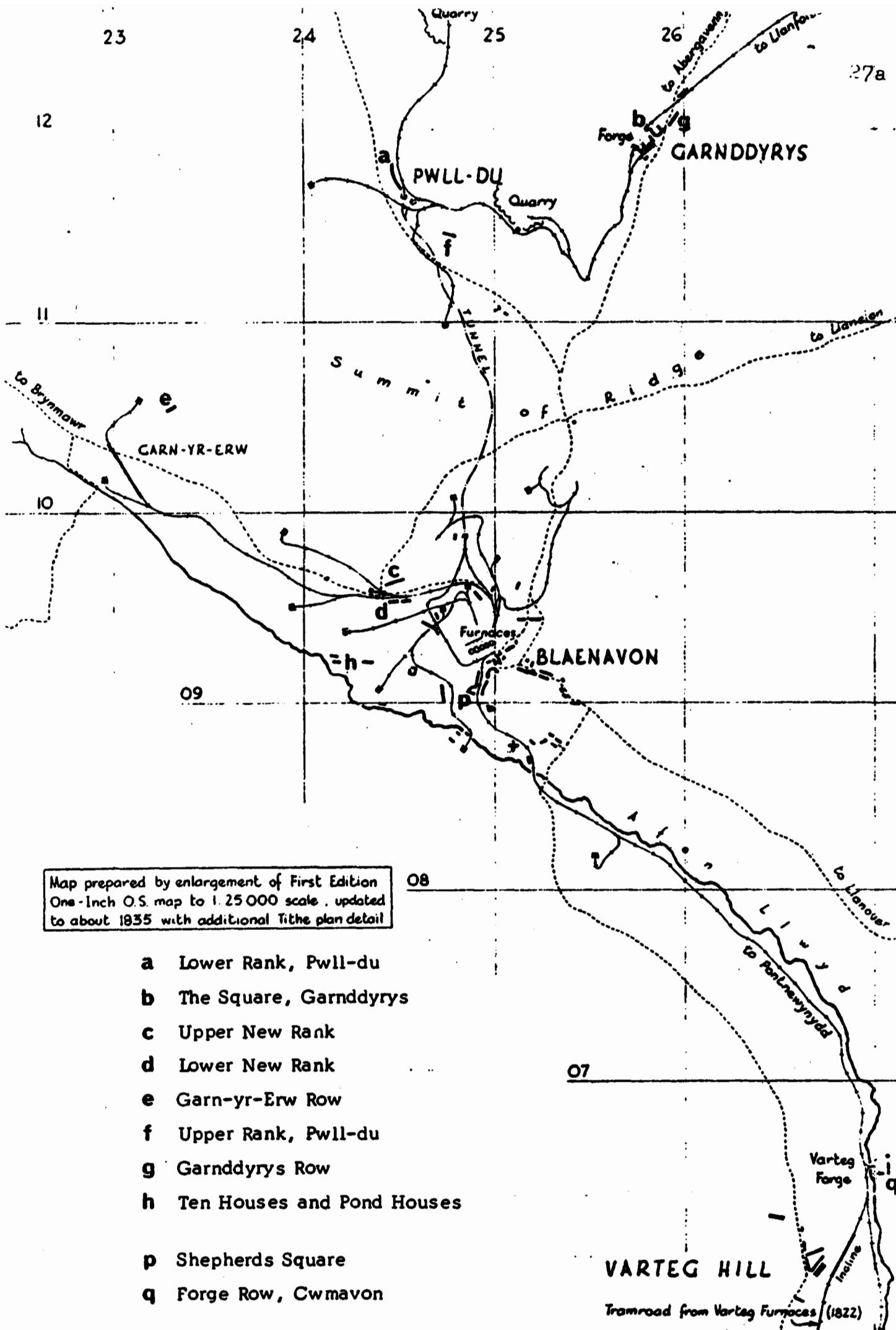
DAVID ANDERSON ©



Forge Row, Cwmavon, Gwent is situated some 3 kms south of Blaenavon above the main road to Pontypool and Newport. ( SO 270 065). It consists of a terrace of 12 dwellings built in 1804 to house iron workers coming to the Varteg Forge which was sited below the row on the bank of the Afon Llwyd.

The row is of seminal importance in the evolution of industrial workers' housing, both in historical and architectural terms. It is a prototype of industrial housing design, retaining some vernacular features whilst looking forward to a totally new concept - masshousing. The date of its construction puts it at the start of the general industrialization of South-East Wales, generated by the heavy demand for iron brought about by the Napoleonic wars. Forge Row offered a high standard of construction and relatively generous floor areas to workmen coming to the Varteg Forge which had entered a period of significant expansion handling pig iron output from the furnaces at Blaenavon.

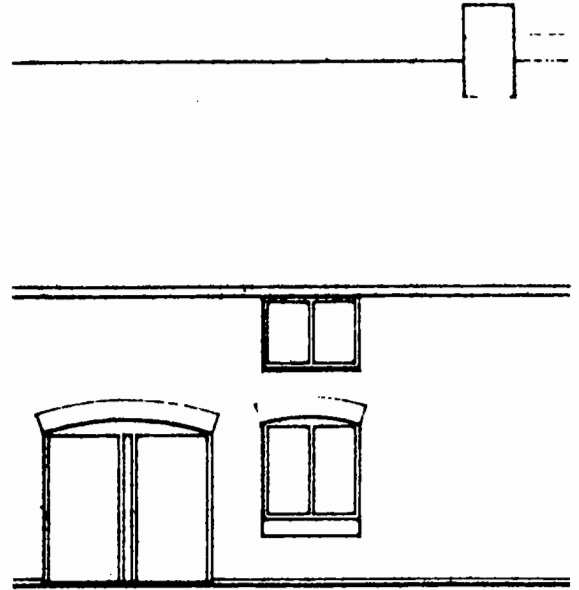
As far as is known, no other terrace of such housing in South Wales from this early date now survives in such a complete state as does Forge Row. Apart from Stack Square at the Blaenavon ironworks ( c 1790 ), it is also now the only surviving example of housing from this first phase of the Industrial Revolution in Gwent. The external envelope of the terrace is remarkably intact and the terrace generally is relatively unchanged in its original appearance and design. Apart from its constructional excellence, the early demise of the Varteg



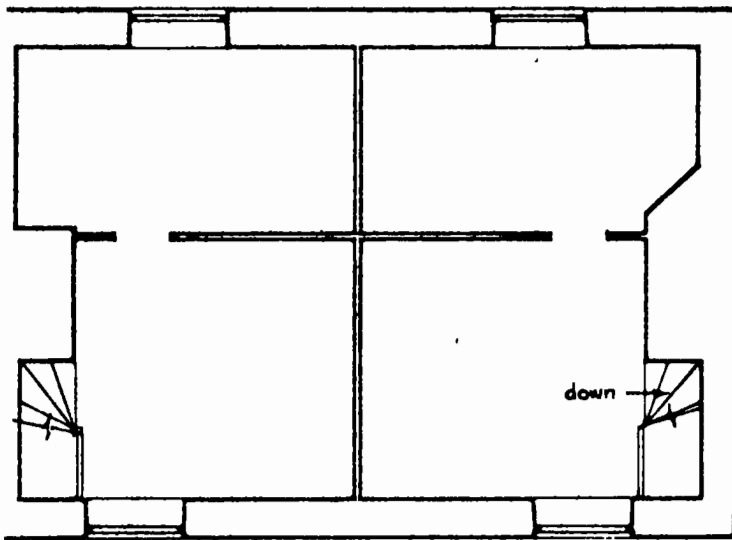
# CWMAVON : · FORGE ROW



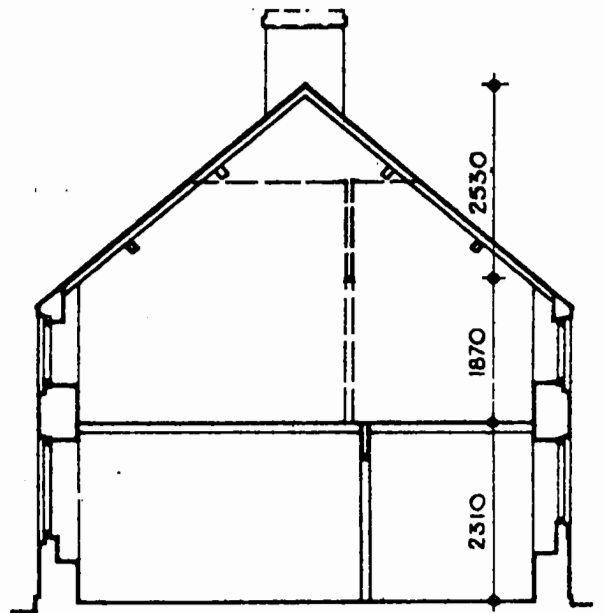
FRONT ELEVATION



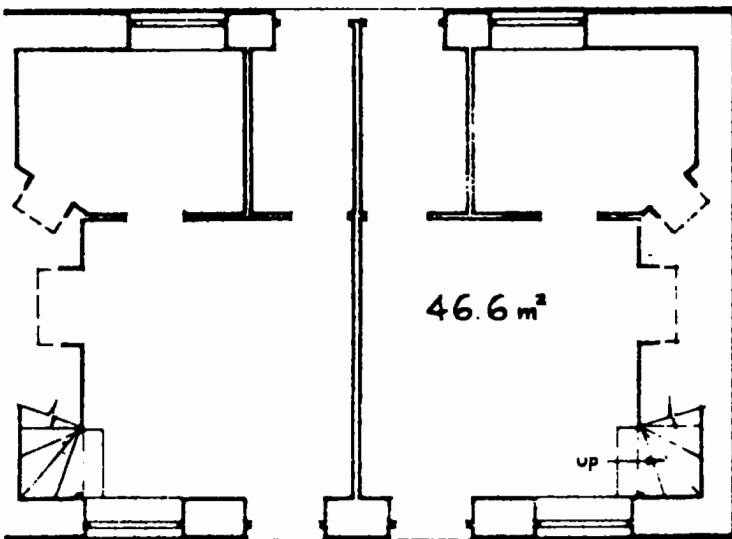
REAR ELEVATION



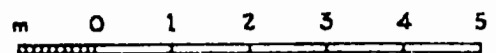
PLAN : FIRST FLOOR



CROSS-SECTION



PLAN : GROUND FLOOR



Forge probably removed the need for major changes induced by continued and heavy use. The Forge is likely to have stopped work for good during the industrial recession of the 1840s. The 1841 census records both the works closure and most of the housing at Cwmavon as being uninhabited. Only six of the houses appear to have been in use when the 1851 census was taken, at an average of 4.3 persons per house, ( as opposed to a national average of 5.4).

The row is dramatically sited on the steep, west facing hillside above the Afon Llwyd. It presents a low, weather resisting, profile some 60m long given by the deep plan and narrow frontage of each cottage under a steeply pitched roof. Each cottage is single-fronted, two storeyed and four roomed, some 46.6 m in nett floor area. The front entrance opens directly on what was originally a kitchen/living room. Leading off this are a passage/larder to the back door, and a small back room probably intended as a parental bedroom. Fireplaces are provided in both ground floor rooms but not on the first floor. Access to the first floor is gained by a winder staircase set into the party wall and against the front exterior wall on the opposite side from the front door. The first floor was possibly an undivided sleeping area; lath and plaster partitions were added at a later date. The row is built in quality, partly-coursed stone rubble upon a well defined stone plinth resting directly on the bed rock. The external walls are some 550mm thick. The row was constructed as a series of pairs - the staircase-cum-fireplace wall being of thick stone and the other cross wall, dividing the pair being thin and built in brick. Thus the plan of each cottage is handed. A vestigial stone cornice runs the length of the walls and is carried across the first floor windows by resting on the timber heads. All the lower openings are spanned by steeply cambered cut stone arches. There is no projection of the cills, but the course and stone below the windows has a small even set back and chamfer. Several original timber-pegged windows survive. The roof, as well as the wall surfaces, remains much as it was built, consisting of heaving grey slates laid in diminishing courses.

The manifold architectural qualities and historical significance of the row were officially acknowledged in August 1973 when they were listed as Grade II items. The value of the row has been, however, little appreciated until recently. Both the local authority and the owners, the NCB, were anxious to see the row demolished as part of the general clearance programme in that area. Although the row is well below current housing standards, having no internal toilets and only one cold water tap per house, the soundness of the construction makes their rehabilitation eminently feasible in 1977.

The preservation of the row was first agitated for by a group of qualified enthusiasts including the staff at the School of Architecture at Cheltenham and Cardiff. After protracted

negotiations with the NCB and the help of the local authority, it was agreed in June 1976 that a buildings preservation trust would be formed to lease the row from the NCB for a nominal amount. An option to purchase is included in the lease. The NCB also gave licence for the proposed trust to move into the row for that summer, the local authority having by then rehoused the existing tenants. The trust installed a caretaker in one of the houses and proceeded to carry out emergency repairs and making the row secure from unwanted visitors.

The trust envisage that the work of rehabilitation to current residential standards will be funded from subscriptions and donations plus grants from various sources. This residential restoration will involve rebuilding the roof, providing proper mains services to the cottages, and replacement of guttering, damaged doors and windows. This will be carried out within the constraints of the listed buildings regulations and with the minimum of external disruption. Encouraged by the D of E's parallel conservation of the furnaces and cottages at the Blaenavon iron works, it is intended that the Gwent museum service have access to a pair of cottages in Forge Row so that they can recreate the living conditions of South Wales ironworkers during the nineteenth century. This would allow for a coherent interpretation of the areas' history. A second pair of cottages is to be converted into a curator's house as soon as possible to provide full accomodation for 2-3 people plus a small exhibition and information area. A study centre will be created out of another four units which will offer self-catering facilities to parties of about 12 people plus an area suitable for teaching about 20 people. The rest of the row would again offer residential accomodation for short-term or holiday lettings.

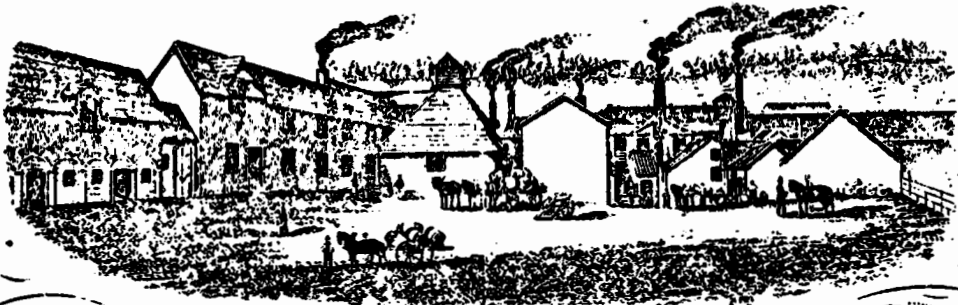
The row has several advantages in its siting as a tourist and study centre. The easterly edge of the site is adjacent to the Brecon Beacons National Park which offers walks and climbs plus 23 major historical sites, ranging from Tretower Castle to Offa's Dyke. It is some 20 kms distance from the Wye Valley which includes Tintern Abbey, Chepstow Castle and Symonds Yat. The Afon Llwyd valley is the most easterly of those in the Welsh coalfield. Thus there are many nineteenth century archaeological sites within easy reach. Opportunities are readily available for current industrial and economic studies, including steel making at Ebbw Vale, open cast mining at Rhydney and problems of urban depopulation.

The Trust is hopeful of drawing on voluntary labour and the donation of building materials where-ever possible. Parties of students from the Cheltenham School of Architecture have already carried out survey and design work as well as some repairs. One large Cotswold comprehensive school has expressed interest in using the study centre for its sixth form. Ad hoc working parties assemble at the row most weekends. It is expected that it will be some years before the row is fully restored but it is hoped that somecottages, including

the study centre, will be available for use in 1978. The museum could be ready by the end of 1977.

Members of the GSIA are invited to contact David Anderson at the School of Architecture (Cheltenham 32501 X 51) or at GSIA meetings if they are actively interested in the project in any way.

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