

Part 1

The Evolution of Living Conditions in Rhyd-y-car Terrace: Changes in Domestic Architecture and Fittings (1805–1985)

Rhyd-y-car Terrace, built around 1795 by ironmaster Richard Crawshay to house workers from his iron-ore mines near Merthyr Tydfil, is one of the most compelling exhibits at St Fagans National Museum of History (St Fagans National Museum of History, n.d.). Reconstructed on the museum site in 1982–83, the six cottages are furnished to represent specific moments in their history: 1805, 1855, 1895, 1925, 1955, and 1985 (National Museum Wales, 2023). This chronological arrangement enables a clear comparison of how building materials, fittings, and decorative choices evolved in response to economic conditions, technological developments, public health concerns, and shifting expectations of comfort and respectability (Evans, 2012). Merthyr Tydfil itself exploded from a village of just 40 homes in 1760 to nearly 8,000 people by 1801, driven by the iron industry, creating acute pressures on housing that shaped the terrace's early form (Evans, 2012; Jenkins, 1998).

The underlying structure of each house remained consistent: a modest two-up, two-down plan with a front living room, a main bedroom above reached by a steep circular staircase next to the fireplace, and a small rear pantry and bedroom beneath a cat-slide roof extension (St Fagans National Museum of History, n.d.). What changed over time were the details of windows and doors, wall and ceiling coverings, roof and eaves treatments, rainwater goods, floor finishes, and internal joinery. These modifications addressed persistent problems such as draughts, damp, poor light, cold floors, and inadequate weather protection while also reflecting broader social and industrial transformations in South Wales (Daunton, 1983; Tarn, 1973). The shift from iron to coal as the dominant industry around 1850 brought modest prosperity but also overcrowding, with cholera outbreaks in 1849 and 1854 killing six residents from the terrace alone, underscoring the need for hygienic improvements (National Museum Wales, 2023).

1805

The 1805 house illustrates the stark simplicity of late eighteenth-century industrial housing, prioritising cheap construction over comfort in a town where rapid growth led to squalid conditions (Evans, 2012). Windows are small timber casements with single glazing and thin frames, designed to admit minimal light while keeping construction costs low and heat loss to a minimum—essential in Merthyr's damp climate where fuel was scarce (St Fagans National Museum of History, n.d.; Jenkins, 1998). Doors are basic ledged-and-braced softwood boards, often poorly fitted with noticeable gaps that allowed cold air to enter freely, exacerbating the chill of uninsulated stone walls (Higgs, 2004). Internal walls are either exposed stone or roughly coated with lime plaster and whitewash, offering little insulation or decoration and doing nothing to combat the pervasive damp from leaking roofs and poor drainage (Tarn, 1973). The roof is clad in local Welsh slate laid in diminishing courses directly onto rafters without any felt underlay, leaving the slates visible from the attic and making leaks more likely in heavy rain—a common issue in the region's wet weather (St Fagans National Museum of History, n.d.). Eaves simply overhang to throw water clear, with no gutters or downpipes provided, leading to erosion of the terrace's front bailey yard (National Museum Wales, 2023). Ground floors are stone flags laid on earth, cold and uneven underfoot, while upper floors use wide, rough-sawn deal boards that creaked and harboured dust (Jenkins, 1998). Internal joinery is rudimentary: plain unmoulded skirting boards, doors hung on heavy strap hinges, and a simple staircase with square newels and basic handrails, including a 'coffin drop' hatch in the ceiling for

manoeuvring large items up the steep stairs (St Fagans National Museum of History, n.d.; National Museum Wales, 2023). These features reflect the terrace's origins as tied housing for mine workers, with little regard for long-term durability amid high turnover and low wages (Daunton, 1983).

1855

By 1855 modest but meaningful improvements appear, influenced by the mid-Victorian economic boom in coal and the growing awareness of public health issues following repeated cholera outbreaks that exposed the dangers of overcrowding and shared water pumps (Higgs, 2004; National Museum Wales, 2023). Windows remain small but now have slightly thicker glass and may be supplemented by internal wooden shutters or thick curtains to retain heat, a practical response to the era's first calls for better ventilation without sacrificing warmth (St Fagans National Museum of History, n.d.). Doors are still plain but better hung, often with a simple threshold strip to reduce draughts at floor level, helping to mitigate the tuberculosis rife in Merthyr's foggy valleys (Evans, 2012). The most significant internal development is the widespread use of inexpensive machine-printed wallpaper, usually in repeating floral or geometric designs on cheap wood-pulp paper, which concealed damp stains, absorbed some moisture, and gave rooms a warmer, more homely feel compared to bare plaster— a psychological boost in homes where families of five or more crammed into single rooms (Higgs, 2004; Tarn, 1973). Roof slates are frequently laid on timber battens rather than directly on rafters, improving ventilation and longevity against the region's relentless rain (Jenkins, 1998). A basic half-round cast-iron gutter is sometimes added to the front eaves, though downpipes are still uncommon, marking an early step towards protecting the bailey from flooding (St Fagans National Museum of History, n.d.). Stone flags persist on the ground floor, but patches of oilcloth or early linoleum occasionally appear in high-traffic areas, providing a smoother and slightly warmer surface that is easier to sweep clean amid the soot from coal fires (National Museum Wales, 2023). Joinery sees little change, but the staircase's coffin drop remains vital for the narrow access, underscoring ongoing spatial constraints (Daunton, 1983).

1895

The 1895 house reflects the impact of late-Victorian building regulations and the greater availability of factory-produced components, as the Public Health Act 1875 mandated better drainage and ventilation in response to urban epidemics (Tarn, 1973; Higgs, 2004). Windows are larger and typically sliding sashes, allowing more natural light and better controlled ventilation while being more weather-tight when closed a direct counter to the gloom and stuffiness that contributed to respiratory illnesses in mining families (St Fagans National Museum of History, n.d.; National Museum Wales, 2023). Front doors acquire simple moulded panels and sometimes a glazed fanlight above, presenting a more respectable street appearance amid Merthyr's growing middle-class districts (Jenkins, 1998). Walls are fully lined with lath and smooth plaster before being papered, often with a dado rail separating a durable lower pattern from a lighter frieze above; ceilings, previously showing exposed joists, are now fully plastered to reduce dust and improve aesthetics (Higgs, 2004). Cast-iron rainwater goods become standard, with half-round gutters and circular downpipes directing water into basic gullies or soakaways, preventing the erosion that plagued earlier eras (Tarn, 1973). Ground floors commonly feature quarry tiles in living areas and linoleum elsewhere for hygiene, while bedrooms gain woven rugs or drugget over bare boards to soften the chill (St Fagans National Museum of History, n.d.). Staircase joinery improves noticeably, with turned

balusters replacing plain square ones and moulded handrails adding a touch of refinement, alongside bed warmers linked to the fireplace for practical comfort (National Museum Wales, 2023; Daunton, 1983).

1925

In the 1925 house, the aspirations of the interwar “respectable working class” are evident, buoyed by stable coal employment and cultural shifts towards domestic pride despite the 1920s recessions (Higgs, 2004; Evans, 2012). Windows revert to casements but with metal opening gear and smaller panes, often dressed with net curtains for privacy and heavier drapes for insulation against the valleys’ biting winds (St Fagans National Museum of History, n.d.). Doors are fully panelled, painted dark externally and lighter inside, and many gain a small projecting porch or canopy for shelter, reflecting bye-law requirements for weather protection (Tarn, 1973). Wall decoration becomes more varied and layered: embossed Anaglypta or Lincrusta below picture rails, floral wallpaper above, and distempered or papered ceilings to mask industrial grime (Jenkins, 1998). Slate roofs continue, but eaves overhangs are increased and cast-iron gutters and downpipes are routinely painted for protection against rust, a maintenance ritual born of experience with corrosion in polluted air (National Museum Wales, 2023). Linoleum dominates hallways and kitchens for easy cleaning, while carpet squares or early fitted carpets appear in parlours, signalling rising wages (Higgs, 2004). The staircase often features decorative turned balusters again, a bull-nosed bottom tread, and polished woodwork that signals pride in the home, with the coffin drop still in use for occasional large deliveries (Daunton, 1983; St Fagans National Museum of History, n.d.).

1955

The 1955 house captures the immediate post-war era, when material shortages coexisted with heightened expectations of domestic comfort under the welfare state (Olechnowicz, 1997). Windows are steel-framed Crittall-type casements with larger panes to maximise light, aligning with steel’s availability despite rationing and a push for brighter homes (St Fagans National Museum of History, n.d.). Doors are frequently flush-panelled or part-glazed, fitted with modern rim latches or Yale locks for security amid rising suburban aspirations (National Museum Wales, 2023). Walls retain wallpaper but in bolder mid-century patterns, while ceilings are usually painted white or cream to enhance the sense of space (Higgs, 2004). Rainwater goods shift towards galvanised steel or early plastic-coated versions, resisting the damp that plagued wartime repairs (Tarn, 1973). Floor finishes show widespread linoleum in wet areas and fitted carpets held by stair rods elsewhere, with rag rugs giving way to more durable options (Jenkins, 1998). Joinery simplifies under austerity constraints, with plain square balusters returning, though handrails are often varnished rather than painted; gardens include typical valley features such as a “livvy” washing shed and a repurposed Anderson air-raid shelter from World War II, highlighting wartime improvisation carried into peacetime (St Fagans National Museum of History, n.d.; Olechnowicz, 1997).

1985

Finally, the 1985 house demonstrates late twentieth-century modernisation amid deindustrialisation, mine closures, and 1979 floods that evacuated residents, prompting grant-aided upgrades (National Museum Wales, 2023; Evans, 2012). Windows and doors are replaced with maintenance-free uPVC

double-glazed units, dramatically reducing heat loss and condensation while improving security—a response to fuel poverty in older stock (St Fagans National Museum of History, n.d.; Daunton, 1983). Walls are plastered and painted in light emulsion colours, with wallpaper used selectively; ceilings often receive textured Artex finishes for a modern texture that hides imperfections (Higgs, 2004). Original slate roofs may remain or have been replaced with concrete interlocking tiles during 1970s–80s refurbishments for better weatherproofing, while gutters and downpipes are almost universally plastic, requiring no upkeep (Tarn, 1973). Floor coverings include sheet vinyl in kitchens and bathrooms for waterproofing, fitted carpets throughout living spaces, and occasionally laminate in hallways for a faux-wood warmth (Jenkins, 1998). Staircases adopt closed-string construction with carpet covering and sometimes integrated low-level lighting, eliminating the old coffin’s drop as lifestyles changed (National Museum Wales, 2023; Olechnowicz, 1997).

These alterations were seldom revolutionary but cumulative, addressing practical defects while meeting rising standards. Early problems of cold, damp, and darkness were mitigated through affordable innovations like wallpaper, linoleum, and sash windows, often encouraged by public health legislation from the 1870s onward (Tarn, 1973; Higgs, 2004). Later enhancements—metal and plastic components, double glazing, textured finishes responded to post-war welfare policies, increased disposable income, and a cultural shift towards viewing decent housing as a basic entitlement rather than a luxury, especially as coal’s decline forced diversification into factories and services (Daunton, 1983; Olechnowicz, 1997; Evans, 2012).

Conclusion

In conclusion, Rhyd-y-car Terrace provides a vivid narrative of how ordinary working-class families in industrial South Wales progressively adapted their homes. The evolving treatment of windows and doors, wall and floor coverings, roof details, rainwater systems, and internal joinery reflects not only technical progress but also profound social and economic change, transforming basic shelter into spaces of relative warmth, hygiene, and personal expression over nearly two centuries (St Fagans National Museum of History, n.d.; National Museum Wales, 2023).

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Part 2

