

## BUILDINGS AT RISK

Heritage: First in a series of articles following decision by groups to join forces in bid to protect properties

# Island's finest buildings

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**Alarmed at the continued neglect of the island's built heritage, last autumn the Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society offered to host a meeting with like-minded groups to discuss what might be done to highlight and promote awareness of the plight of vulnerable buildings.**

As a result, a network has been formed which already includes all the active Heritage Trusts on the island and national groups such as the Victorian Society, Steam Railway Supporters Association and the Antiquarian and Natural History Society.

Their mission is to draw the nation's attention to buildings of architectural or historic value, and what's at risk, and to encourage and support government, planners and developers to return to best practice, which sometimes need not cost much more than neglect.

The island did have both a conservation team in planning, and an active registration system. But the conservation team was disbanded/sidelined, and registration has almost entirely gone by the wayside, with the suggestions that buildings will only be considered for registration if they're about to be demolished – but by then much of their historic character and value may be lost.

Unsympathetic alterations have also been permitted in years gone by – be they

to registered buildings like Baillie-Scott's own house, or allowing short-lived MDF reproductions on masonry facades that were supposed to remain intact.

It is absolutely recognised that, with rare exceptions, buildings cannot just be preserved – the ideal result is often if a building can be adapted to provide a sustainable use without damage to the important features.

Key to this is the availability of conservation support to/within the planning department and to owners/developers, and recognition of buildings of value and their registration if appropriate.

There are many cases such as Ballaughton Manor, which is now threatened with demolition of the remaining front wing, where registration was started but never followed through by the planning department.

Indeed, under a previous conservation officer many registration proposals were prepared but most eventually disappeared years ago into a 'black hole' in the planning department.

Some important buildings, such as the Castle Mona, are very much in the public eye already, but many are not.

A campaign is being launched to draw attention to buildings of value and buildings at risk, what neglect – by owners or government – can bring, and how sympathetic conservation and adaptation can bring new life to historic buildings.

Find out more about the Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society at [www.manxantiquarians.com](http://www.manxantiquarians.com)



The Castle Mona pictured recently by Isle of Man Newspapers Mike Wade



Inverary Castle, in the West Highlands which may have inspired Castle Mona architect George Steuart



Attingham Park



Culzean Castle in which may have George Steuart



The Castle Mona

# threatened by neglect

## Castle Mona - a Georgian gem that's steeped in history

Today the Castle Mona presents a forlorn appearance, despite its position at the centre point of Douglas's seafront – yet it is an Isle of Man link to some of the Georgian age's greatest architects.

It is also a link to the former Lords of Mann the Dukes of Atholl, who held influence over many aspects of Manx life even after the 1765 Revestment.

Before its closure as a hotel in 2006, the architectural historians MM Rix and WR Serjeant wrote: 'The town of Douglas has few individual buildings of architectural note. Of those few, Castle Mona, erected... at the beginning of the 19th century, is the most distinguished.'

Recently more has been found out about the building's Scottish architect, George Steuart (1730-1806), thanks to research by art historian Sally Goodsir, a former valuer for auctioneers Christie's who is now assistant curator for the decorative arts at the Queen's Gallery at Buckingham Palace.

Steuart - who was born near the Dukes of Atholl's Blair Castle in Scotland - was the subject of Goodsir's MA dissertation at the York University, inspired by the Neoclassical mansion Attingham Park (now owned by the National Trust) which Steuart designed in Shropshire and his letters to the Atholls held at Blair Castle and in the Manx Museum.

In 2010 she wrote an essay for the Georgian Group Journal (patron Prince Charles) revealing that Steuart had worked as a house painter in some of the great late 18th-century mansions designed by the architect Robert Adam.

From the late 1750s to 1780s, Adam's Roman-inspired Neoclassical decoration became the height



A historic picture of the interior of the Castle Mona

of fashion. It turns out that Steuart painted the interior of the splendid Kenwood House in Hampstead.

The Dukes of Atholl later helped set up George Steuart as an architect and he also undertook work for them in the Isle of Man.

He first visited in 1779, when he advised on the repair of the prisons, notably Castle Rushen, and designed new bridges. In 1790 he returned to build a new harbour breakwater in Douglas known as the Red Pier. Serving shipping until 1936, it was essential to the town's rise as a resort.

Steuart also designed Ramsey courthouse, the obelisk in the churchyard of Old Kirk Braddan (where he and his brother Charles are buried) and, of course, the Castle Mona.

The Castle Mona uses Adam-style swagged ornament on the towers and a large fanlight over the main door, but this is combined with Gothic crenellations. There are also circular Coade stone plaques - the height of fashion in the early 1800s thanks to their use in the Brighton Pavilion.

Steuart designed the Castle Mona between 1801 and 1804, when he was well into his 70s. John, 4th Duke

of Atholl, had recently been appointed Governor-General in 1793 and wanted a new residence on the seashore at Douglas.

Steuart may have taken his inspiration from two Scottish castles which had a combination of Gothic and Neoclassical styles: Inverary Castle, home of the Duke of Argyll, in the West Highlands, and Culzean Castle in Ayrshire, built by Robert Adam for the Earls of Cassilis with sweeping sea views over the Firth of Clyde and towards the Isle of Arran. It was from Arran that Steuart sourced the stone for the Castle Mona: a whitish-coloured granite.

The Duke first held a dinner on the site of his new mansion, to which he invited all the island's gentry. The stone for the building was transported from Scotland by ships able to sail close inshore at high tide and the blocks were then tipped into the sea close to the building site. At low tide, they were recovered and hauled to where they were needed. A large lawn was laid out and a half-mile-long curving driveway was constructed. The interior featured imported fireplaces and the grand saloon featured a huge painted ceiling.

Crown glass from Leith, near Edinburgh, was also used.

Despite the cost of the project rising to four times the original estimate of £8,000, the Duke celebrated its completion with a grand reception. Sadly George Steuart, by then 74, was unable to 'partake of the pleasures of the table', but he did make an appearance 'to the great joy of the Duke and the rest of the company'.

Steuart died the following year but his son, Robert, became the island's Receiver General and the family's land was later sold to form upper Douglas and their home, Lough House, became the Villa Marina.

In 1828 Dorothy Wordsworth, sister of the poet William, visited and jotted down in her diary: 'Cliffs picturesque above Mona Castle; a waterfall (without water); the castle of very white stone from Scotland, the style of Inverary... Then to the Duke's gardens, which are beautiful. I thought of Italian villas, and Italian bays... Nature and art hand in hand.'

Soon after, rising tension with the Keys saw the 4th Duke of Atholl departing under a cloud and in the 1830s the Castle Mona was

converted into a hotel.

By the time Cannell's Guide to the island's hotels and taverns was published in 1843, it was one of the finest places to stay: 'The largest Hotel in the island, it is a princely mansion, magnificent for its size... Mr Heron, formerly of the Porto Bello, Dublin, is the proprietor.'

Over time the gardens were lost as Douglas's promenades were developed and other hotel buildings sprang up alongside. But even into the 2000s the hotel was advertised as offering 'high levels of service... All our ensuite rooms are traditionally and tastefully decorated and many of the original features of our manor house have been cherished.'

Sadly, on December 15, 2006, news reports read: 'The Castle Mona has abruptly announced it is closing. It's closed its door and the management are ringing clients, telling them the news. The Castle Mona is one of the most striking buildings on the promenade. It is also one of the earliest... With 99 bedrooms, the Breeze night club, the Office and a bowling alley, it is a popular venue at this time of year. And because of the variety on offer its closure is going to hit many people... there will be few other places that can accommodate them at this time of year.'

Since then plans to reopen the building as an up-market hotel and to remodel it as an IT college have all fallen by the wayside, and the building now stands forlorn and looking increasingly shabby. Do we really want to risk losing this historic building, with its connections to great architects of the Age of Elegance and the old Lords of Mann? Surely it would be wonderful to see its stonework cleaned to something like its original shiny white granite and made a worthy centre-piece for Douglas's fine promenade?

Simon Artymiuk



Ayrshire, built by Robert Adam, inspired Castle Mona architect