

BUILDINGS AT RISK

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

Hall with a proud military history

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MANY who walk along Peel Road in Douglas may dismiss a long stone-walled structure with double doors in its gable end as 'just a warehouse'.

However, this building close to the Brown Bobby petrol filling station was built in 1896 as a hall in which the Douglas Company of Volunteer Rifles could perform military drill and practise using weaponry.

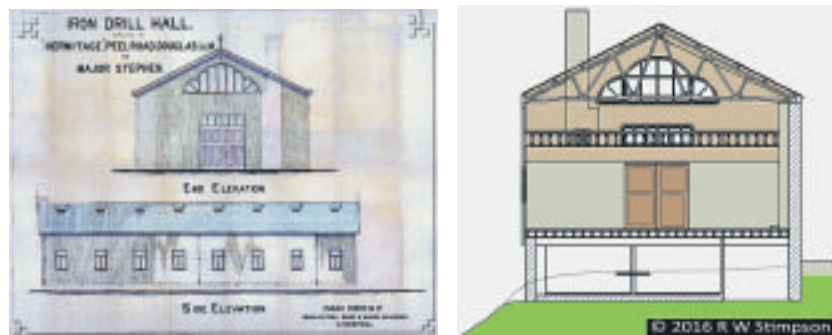
Volunteer companies charged with looking after defence at times when regular troops were abroad were first raised in the Isle of Man in the late 1700s. In the 1860s, local volunteer companies reappeared.

Taking charge of the Douglas Company of Volunteer Rifles was Captain John Senhouse Goldie Taubman, owner of the Nunnery, and they initially met in St James' Hall in Athol Street. The brewer William O'Kell later provided a drill hall and store yard in James Street near today's Pickwick's newsagents.

In 1869, Goldie Taubman built a dedicated drill shed on land he owned at the Lake in Douglas – and it was used as the venue for an opening ball for the Isle of Man Railway in 1873. Subsequent expansion of the railway terminus resulted in the Peel Road hall being built to replace the Lake one.

Playing a key role was Major Robert Swan Stephen, son of Deemster John Clowes Stephen. Robert was a UK and Manx-trained solicitor and advocate and he went on to become an MHK, twice Mayor of Douglas and a director of the Isle of Man Bank. In 1892 he was one of the first Army officers to be awarded the Volunteer Officer Decoration by Queen Victoria in 1892.

In 1896, Major Stephen purchased a property called The Hermitage which had a garden with a substantial perimeter wall off Peel Road and below the Brown Bobby. The gardens sloped steeply down from the roadway to the river below. The plans



Original 19th century plan drawings by the builders of Douglas Drill Hall, now held by Manx National Heritage

show that the building incorporated part of the old garden wall and the floor was then built up on pillars over the steep bank.

Drawings of the proposed drill hall supplied by the company Isaac Dixon & Co, of Windsor Iron Works in Edge Hill, Liverpool, survive in the Manx Museum collection. Isaac Dixon employed 110 men and their modular-style buildings, made of the new boon material corrugated iron, became very popular in Britain and the overseas colonies. Chairman of the Isle of Man Victorian Society Robert Stimpson has found their adverts in publications such as the Irish Builder of 1884, a golfing annual of 1888, and a church almanac of the period.

The Douglas Drill Hall as actually built differs from the firm's drawings as they failed to take into account the slope in Peel Road itself. The drawings also do not show the interior layout, which included a four-lane firing range below the main hall and a stairway giving access to it and the armoury.

Construction of the building began in May 1896 and it was completed by late October. It was formally opened by Lieutenant Governor Lord Henniker on December 21 with an award ceremony for marksmen. One of the features of the hall was that Morris Tubes were fitted to earlier guns to allow miniature rounds to be fired for practice, although later Volunteers used 0.22in rifles instead.

Robert Stimpson points to the building being of historical significance as the only other known Isaac Dixon drill hall to survive into the 21st century, the 1885-built

Helensburgh Drill Hall near Glasgow, was demolished in 2005. That building was built entirely of iron, so it lacked the unique part-rubble stone and part-iron construction used in Douglas.

From the start the Douglas Drill Hall was hired out for the holding of the mayor's annual children's parties, furniture sales and an annual hotpot dinner for the rifle club.

In March 1900 a number of volunteers were sworn in at the drill hall before leaving the island to fight in the Boer War in South Africa on April 17. The newspapers of the time listed nine men, but a further report of July 1901 lists six different men returning! By that time Major Stephen had resigned from the Douglas Company of Volunteer Rifles due to ill health. He was to die on the Italian island of Capri in 1903, aged only 59.

In 1911 another sad event occurred when Lady Raglan, wife of Lieutenant Governor Lord Raglan, used the drill hall to provide a tea for the widows and orphans of those lost in the Ellan Vannin steamer disaster.

During the First World War, the drill hall was used as a central armoury for island forces, including armed police. Military camping equipment was also stored in the building and many of the Douglas Volunteers were posted to guard duties at Knockaloe and other internment camps. Then, after hostilities ceased, from 1919 the hall was used by W Shippies as a workshop employing 'Industrious Manx Disabled Ex-Servicemen' to make basket, cane and wickerwork products. This lasted until 1923, when the drill hall

was sold to the Isle of Man Government for £2,000.

In the Depression years and the drill hall found a new role as a labour exchange and signing-on location for winter work schemes, but in 1937 it was used for scrutineering motorcycles competing in the Manx Grand Prix. In that period competitors were allowed to ride escorted through the streets to the back of the Grandstand to allow the era's vegetable-based oils to warm up.

In August 1938, the Isle of Man Volunteers' 60 years of existence came to an end with the founding of the Territorial Army, but the outbreak of the Second World War saw the drill hall again serving a key role. A gas mask training hut was installed in the yard in front and a Bofors gun on a wheeled carriage was based in the hall.

However, in June 1940 a new drill hall was opened at Tromode and the old Isaac Dixon-built structure became instead the 'Wool Control Building'. The aim was to ensure that all wool production in the island could be controlled and wartime prices be paid to recompense farmers at a time when normal trade was curtailed and shipping movements restricted.

With the return of peace, the Peel Road drill hall's later uses included as a Scout hut, an employment exchange and as a Government store building. It became neglected and somewhat delapidated.

Towards the end of the last decade, it was put up for sale, with agents Black Grace Cowley advertising: 'FOR SALE - former Wool Control Building, Peel Road, Douglas. Warehouse: approx



3,386sq ft. Adjoining Building: approx 580sq ft. Shooting range: approx 1,362sq ft. Price: £345,000 exclusive.... We understand that the area is zoned for "light industrial use"; however, consideration could be given to alternative uses, or redevelopment subject to detailed planning approval.'

Fortunately, the purchasers in 2012, Glenville Salvage and Reclamation Ltd, did not seek to 'redevelop' it. Instead they have carried out extensive repairs, adding new render to the side walls, fixing the gutters, removing foliage, carrying out repointing of the stone-work and restoring the side wall window. The old timber sash windows have also been replaced with green aluminium-framed double-glazed units - not ideal for historical purists but providing protection from the weather.

This praiseworthy attention shows an appreciation for the building which seems lacking in officialdom. Whilst expressing their appreciation of all that Glenville have done, Robert Stimpson and other members of the Isle of Man Victorian Society fear for the drill hall should it be sold again in the future. Its setting may soon radically alter if plans to construct three-storey blocks of flats on a nearby showroom site come to pass – and unless the building is given registered protection what is to prevent a future owner replacing it with further flats?

A few years ago Christopher Thomas, MHK for Douglas West, asked the Minister for Environment, Food and Agriculture Richard Ronan: 'a) What Manx National Heritage's views were on the historical, evidential, communal and aesthetic value and significance of the Drill Hall, Peel Road, and whether it made a recommendation to register the building, and b) what the Department of Infrastructure's conservation officers' views were...'

Mr Ronan's reply was that in 2013 MNH had stated that the drill hall would meet the criteria for being registered due to its 'historical interest, because of its military associations, and use since 1896...[plus] it is of architectural interest in terms of its construction and that it is unique in the island.' However, despite this the DoI's conservation officer had concluded: 'The property has some historic interest... but that in itself is not considered sufficient for addition to the protected buildings register. Discussion has taken place about the installation of a plaque... if and when it is redevelped.'

But surely a plaque will be no substitute for this unique survivor whose story encompasses so many aspects of the island's late 19th and 20th century military and social history? If it were to be lost in the future due to lack of protection it would be both a tragedy and a travesty.



Major Robert Swan Stephen, who had the drill hall built, pictured in his later years

Opinion

Military heritage saved – for now

WRITTEN BY

ROBERT W STIMPSON
Chairman, Isle of Man
Victorian Society

During the government sale of the Douglas Armoury and Drill Hall, commonly known as the Wool Centre, the government department responsible declined to register the drill hall building despite its proven importance to our architectural and international military heritage.

The same apparent policy of ‘turning a blind eye’ was applied to the Nunnery sale shortly afterwards, leaving the public wondering if there were two sets of rules – one for the government and one for the public!

Fortunately, the long-term neglect by the government of the iconic and internationally unique drill hall has been comprehensively reversed by its new owners.

They have shown quite clearly by the vastly improved state of the exterior of the building, that they have invested heavily in its conservation and repair.

Whilst the choice of green aluminium double-glazed windows will not please everyone, their careful incorporation has improved the weather-tightness of the structure, and placed it in a better position to survive well into the future.

They are to be congratulated for the extensive internal structural repairs to the armoury floor and stairway which had been ravaged by worm and rot, and for the excellent match of its new role as an architectural salvage business warehouse to the building’s architectural prominence in the island.

This entrepreneurial heritage-focused excellence is an example of what can be achieved despite the failure of the government of the Isle of Man to enforce its own procedures and legislation, where political interference frustrates and defers due process, resulting in the failure of the insular registered building process to be operated in any effective manner.

The long-term position of the drill hall is still far from guaranteed as any new owners in the future might acquire the site with the sole objective of flattening it and building a three-storey block of apartments to match those planned for the former car

show room next door.

Without any effective level of Registered Building protection it remains at future risk of being unsympathetically ‘modernised’ or demolished.

Our building registration process is being diverted by a blinkered ambition to create some form of misguided architectural utopia removing anything anywhere which might be looked on as ‘old’ – the demolitions and planning promiscuity so far allowed in Douglas and elsewhere is akin to architectural euthanasia.

Unless it is stopped now and a fully effective building registration and protection system is introduced, to replace our current toothless and impotent system, our descendants will rue this period of heritage heresy being propagated by members of our elected bodies with their flagrant disregard for the current legislation and due process, inadequate though it may be.

Our decrepit legislation is wholly past its ‘sell by date’ and must be comprehensively overhauled with an open, transparent and independent set of regulations with heavy fines for those who attempt to bypass or ignore them.

Any new system must be fully accountable and independent of the planning and political systems by way of tightly legislated process with effective staffing and strong financial penalties for those that attempt to bypass it.

We are not seeking a ban on any development – far from it – as the need for this island to develop is key to our future success.

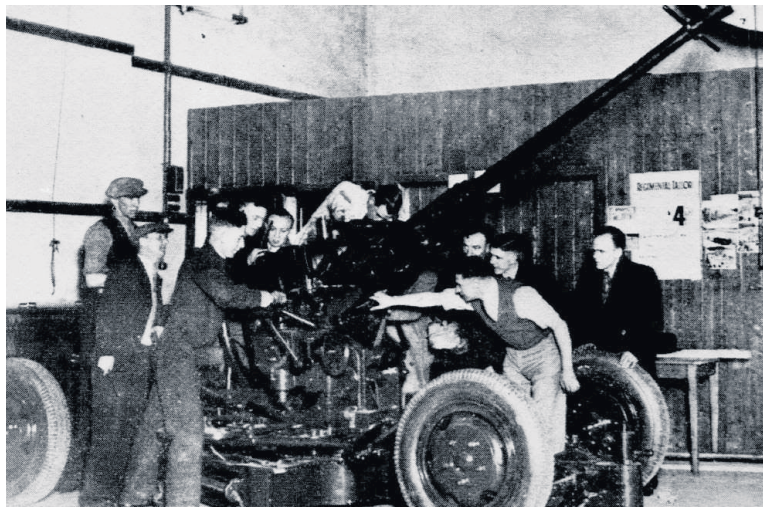
What we are seeking is an efficient, effective building protection registration process which is not open to any form of subtle abuse, filibuster or misappropriation. There are many examples we can offer to support this position.

Government seeks to demonstrate to the world that the Isle of Man is an advanced world leading democracy – sadly at the moment its heritage is being dismantled by legislation as ineffective as if it had originated from the opposite end of the international political spectrum!

It must change to restore accountability and to re-establish the credibility of the Isle of Man.



An interior view of part of the building



A view of part of the corrugated iron drill hall in Helensborough, by the same firm, which survived until just a few years ago but has now been demolished

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A period advertisement from the Liverpool company which supplied the building, as well as many corrugated iron structures across the British Empire