

## BUILDINGS AT RISK

Heritage: Our series of articles continues with Hugh Davidson putting the spotlight on buildings in the south

# Eyesore large buildings blighting beautiful south

*How do you give overseas visitors a favourable impression? Concentrate on the many good parts - 'but sometimes there is no escape'*

### Feature

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**T**his feature will give examples from Rushen since I live there, but the issues are national.

Question: How do you give overseas visitors a favourable impression of Port Erin and Port St Mary when there are highly visible 'eyesore' buildings? Answer: Concentrate on the many good parts.

But sometimes there is no escape.

Rushen Heritage Trust has run two acclaimed exhibitions on WW2 women's internment, attracting more than 6,000 visits.

Distinguished visitors from USA, Germany, Switzerland, Liechtenstein and Britain came here specifically to visit the exhibitions.

Many had mothers here in 1940. They wanted to see particular places and this proved embarrassing to their local guides.

'Where was the Health Centre in 1940?' It was The Hydro, later the Ocean Castle Hotel, now an empty site, creating a gaping hole in Port Erin's Upper Promenade.

'Could I please see the Belle Vue Hotel where my mother was interned?' The name was changed to the Port Erin Royal. It has been empty since 2008, in a poor state.

'Where was the married camp?' Trip to the former Balqueen Hydro, once Port St Mary's flagship building, empty since 1987, one half demolished, the other with the twin towers in pitiful condition.

There are other 'big eyesores' in Port Erin such as the Marine Biological Station (closed in 2006).

Port Erin is not unique in having dilapidated sites - Douglas Promenade has at least three.

The principal problem, especially in Port Erin and Douglas, is that the built environment has still not yet fully transitioned from the days of mass tourism to the present mixed economy.

In 1961 there were 15 hotels



Gaping hole in Port Erin's Upper Promenade where The Hydro, later the Ocean Castle Hotel, stood



How the Hydro Hotel looked in the 1920s

with more than 20 rooms in Port Erin and Port St Mary. Today there is only one still trading - the Falcon's Nest.

Of these 15, nine have been converted into apartments, most with reasonable success architecturally.

In particular Imperial Heights is a much more attractive building than its predecessor.

Of the remaining five, three are empty or dilapidated, two demolished or standing empty.

Let's study three prime examples of high profile building sites not in use, all with adverse impact on pride in the community.

The former Bay Queen is the saddest sight of all, especially for me, since my father Alec Davidson was the architect of the 'new' West Wing, completed in 1936.

The Kelly family ran the hotel for over 50 years from 1914-65, when Walter Kelly retired.

The origin was two boarding houses separated by a wide gap. In 1926, this gap was filled with a magnificent new ballroom on the ground floor, new rooms above, and balcony in front. This was all demolished in 2002.

The still extant 1936 extension added 50 more bedrooms, new reception hall with terrazzo tiles laid by Italians; mezzanine floor modelled on the Art Deco Waldorf Astoria in New York, with two lifts - very innovative at the time; and dining room which could seat 400.

In the 1950s, the Balqueen Hydro (name changed to Bay Queen in 1970) was a top resort hotel, usually full with 300 guests from May 1 to the end of September.

It declined in the 1970s, staggered through the 1980s and closed in 1987, almost 30 years ago.

The hotel was sold in 1965, went through various hands and was eventually bought by Victor and Gladys Sharma in 1987 for £400,000. It was purchased by Hartford Homes for £4 million in May 2007.

The West Wing was registered in 2001 because it was of 'special architectural and historical interest'. The notes

stated: 'the 1936 extension ... is the only one in this distinctive Art Deco style ... and represents a unique example of its type in the island context.'

Hartford Homes is progressing a planning application for high quality apartments in front and town houses behind for submission in the next few months.

The Belle Vue Hotel was built by Thomas Costain in 1885. The first owner was Thomas Clague, a well-known entrepreneur of his day. It was developed in three stages - 35 rooms in 1885, then the distinctive turret wing in 1909, and finally the Edwardian wing. In 1932, it had 85 bedrooms and 14 bathrooms.

The Belle Vue housed some colourful personalities such as Gil Robertshaw, Chris Robertshaw MHK, and Jack Wilson who owned three other leading Port Erin hotels and

changed the name to Port Erin Royal. In 2008 the hotel was closed and bought by Dandara, who are submitting a planning application for 30 apartments in September.

The Ocean Castle Hotel was built in 1890. It had a pleasing appearance with a triangular design centred by a tower reminiscent of the famous one at Pisa, but not leaning. The 1961 brochure claimed accommodation for 200 guests, a TV lounge and automatic lift.

There were some notable interior features, including a fine coloured glass ceiling. Some guests said that it had the feel of a 1930s transatlantic liner. The hotel was closed in 2007 and demolished in two days in 2010. The empty site looks neglected and untidy.

Successes. There have been some successes in maintaining or restoring buildings in Rushen. The former Colinson's Café was tastefully converted to office and then residential use by Mr Lithgoe in the 1970s, and the present owner, Jim Mellon, maintains it to a high standard.

The Bay Hotel in Port Erin remained empty for some years in the 1990s, and was successfully renovated by Martin Brunnschweiler - it's now a thriving dining pub; and the Government did well in updating and improving the Bradda Glen Restaurant complex, now brought to life again by Bob and Sheila Creasey. Some hotels have been tastefully converted into apartments.

So authentic conversion and updating, though not easy in today's flat market, is possible.

**'Built environment has still not fully transitioned from the days of mass tourism to the present mixed economy'**



The Bay Queen as it looks today on the Port St Mary Promenade



The Balqueen Hydro, later the Bay Queen, in Port St Mary was a top resort hotel, usually full in the 1950s, from May to the end of September



The Port Erin Royal, previously the Belle Vue, has lain empty since 2008



The Belle Vue Hotel in all its original glory

### Success stories



The former Collinson's Cafe, Port Erin, is well looked after by owner Jim Mellon



Bradda Glen Restaurant has been brought back to life by Bob and Sheila Creasey



The Bay Hotel, Port Erin, renovated by Martin Brunnschweiler, is now a successful pub

## Opinion

# Let's have a public vote to register the Top 20 'Grot Spots'

WRITTEN BY  
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**T**he island is a beautiful country, but its built environment is letting it down.

This makes it less attractive to live in, visit, or do business in.

We are rightly positioning ourselves as a modern international business centre, but highly visible derelict buildings and demolition sites undermine this promise.

As our tax advantages reduce, so our 'quality of life offer' increases in importance.

The new Local Government and Building Control (Amendment) Bill, raising penalties for dilapidated buildings, may improve small buildings, but will have little impact on large ones.

The Manx property market is flat and values have declined in recent years. Developers need lots of confidence in the market's future to justify heavy upfront costs. This is currently lacking.

Our developers are skillful marketers and play a valuable role in our economy but require reasonable profits to be sustainable. The island needs imaginative new policies backed by government spending and a 'carrot and stick' approach towards developers. Some suggestions for discussion:

1. Dramatically increase government marketing spend, communicating our many advantages and attracting new people and businesses. While there are some excellent business development plans, the Island seems seriously under-marketed as a place.

2. Establish an innovative Dilapidated Building Register for highly visible dilapidated sites not in use. This could become known informally as the 'Grot Spot Register'.

3. The Top 20 'Grot Spots' to be registered could be established by public vote. Isle of Man Newspapers could lead this by publicising candidates submitted by the public and organising the vote. (Tip - focus on the top 20 and avoid distracting long lists.)

4. Owners of 'grot spots' could be legally obliged to publish an improvement plan within six months of registration.

5. After two years on the Register, any Top 20 'Grot Spot' would become liable to pay rates on an escalating scale. 'Grot Spots' detract from community pride and owners should not be rewarded with rate holidays.

6. Owners of any large site empty for more than a year would be required to landscape and plant it within six months, to minimise adverse visual impact.

7. The Government shares a national interest with the private sector in bringing idle sites into economic use. It has succeeded with public/private partnerships in other sectors, and here is another opportunity to use these skills.

8. Developers could be granted a 'Success Fee' for bringing Grot Spots into productive use - eg 10 per cent bonus for selling all 30 apartments in a new block within two years.

9. The requirement to reserve 25 per cent of new flats for low cost housing is equitable and sound. However it significantly reduces developers' returns on land assets. The 25 per cent rule is a social policy and therefore government's responsibility. It was also designed for a more buoyant market. Government could refund lost margin to developers.

Let's upgrade our built environment so that we can be proud of it.