

BUILDINGS AT RISK

Heritage: Our series of articles continues with Summer Hill Stables on Queen's Promenade in Douglas

These stables must remain a genuine working environment

Feature

Following the shock news that the Victorian horse tram stables in Douglas have been put on the market by Douglas Council, Ed More of the Friends of the Douglas Bay Horse Tramway (FoD-BHT) outlines the buildings' history and take us inside to see what island heritage stands to be lost if the stables are sold to developers

Summer Hill Stables, Queen's Promenade, Douglas.

In 1877, Douglas Bay Horse Tramway founder and proprietor Thomas Lightfoot purchased three unassuming terraced cottages at the northern end of Queen's Promenade, near to the bottom of Summer Hill (formerly known as Burnt Mill Hill, having been named after an early snuff manufacturing mill which burnt down in the late 18th century).

'Behind the cottages in the rear yard, he proceeded to develop new stables for his tramway enterprise, with stone walls and slated roof.

'The first and largest of the stables buildings accommo-



The cobble yard at the Summer Hill Stables in Douglas

dated up to 18 horses on the ground floor, with hay and grain lofts on the two floors above. A central box gallery to the roof allowed natural light to illuminate the working areas of the building during daylight hours, hay and straw bedding able to be directly forked down to the ground floor stabling area where it was needed, and created a ventilation draught.

'Between the large stables building and the cottages, a cobble yard afforded space for horses to be tethered, washed and groomed before and after each turn on the tramway, and manure to be stockpiled before carts removed it away from the site.

'By the end of the 19th century, the "lower" stables' capacity had increased to accommodate 33 horses, first

by the addition of a small two-storey building abutting the front of the main stables with wooden stalls for eight horses, then a separate lean-to structure at the rear of the main building which provided stalls for a further seven horses.

'A larger adjoining "upper" stable block and rear blacksmith shop were added in the Edwardian era, housing a further 45 horses, such was

the demand for transportation by horse tramway along Douglas promenades during the Victorian and Edwardian periods.'

THE ABOVE IS NOT TAKEN FROM THE HISTORY BOOKS.

We actually have these working original Victorian and Edwardian stables tucked away here in the modern urban environment of Douglas, complete with smithy, feedstock rolling machinery, hay lofts and cobbled washyard.

A rare treasure indeed to find in a developed country, the Summer Hill Stables undoubtedly add significantly to the heritage attraction and experience that the Douglas Bay Horse Tramway is able to offer its visitors, quite comparable with elements of the highly-prized Cregneash village.

The stables site and buildings remain in the ownership of Douglas Borough Council, which acquired the horse tramway and its assets right back in 1902 and operated it until the end of the 2015 season.

After the council's decision to cease operations in January 2016, the operator role has temporarily been assumed

by Isle of Man Railways.

But the government-approved proposals for the future operation of the horse tramway do not extend to acquiring the Summer Hill Stables from the council.

Given there are no alternative practical uses for the historic stables buildings, if they do not continue in use by the Douglas Bay Horse Tramway, their fate will surely be demolition and replacement by yet more offices or apartments on Queen's Promenade.

It seems local and national government in the Isle of Man have yet to receive enlightenment with regard to heritage custodianship and conservation.

Between now and the end of October, politicians, civil servants, residents and visitors to the island should take the opportunity to experience first-hand the quite unique working urban transport stables at Summer Hill, dating back to 1877.

Guided tours are held on Saturdays and Sundays from midday when you can meet all the 'Trammers' in residence.

A new exhibition area and mini-gift shop are open 12.30pm to 4pm, Wednesdays to Sundays.

Opinion

Horse trams: why selling off all of the fa

WRITTEN BY
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At the time when the Summer Hill Stables came into use, horse trams were not only new to the Isle of Man, but new to British towns and cities in general.

They have survived for all this time while horse trams and their associated stables elsewhere were replaced by more modern forms of power, or lines were closed down altogether.

Indeed, in the late 1970s

the Isle of Man seemed to publish more literature about the horse trams than it did about its Victorian steam and electric railways - and such was Douglas Corporation's pride in them that they had a tram specially painted for the Lord of Mann to ride on during her Silver Jubilee year.

The Douglas trammers' diligent care of the tram horses and painstaking maintenance of the historic trams themselves has always shone through.

How ironic, then, that this unique transport survivor has only in the last few years come under threat from its very owners despite this being a time of unprecedented public appreciation of heritage attractions elsewhere.

This is also an era which has seen the reappearance of long-closed tram systems in cities such as London, Nottingham, Manchester, Edinburgh, Dublin and Birmingham as most of the world struggles to reduce levels of traffic congestion and pollution.

It was Britain which had the first passenger tram as far back as 1807, when in a corner of South Wales a similar seaside set-up to what we see now in Douglas saw a horsedrawn stagecoach on rails being run along a roadway to connect the growing industrial port of Swansea with the seaside villages of the Mumbles and the eastern Gower peninsula.

Oddly, the example this Oystermouth Tramway set was one not much copied in Britain

- so it was in the United States, at Baltimore in Maryland, that in 1828 the concept bore fruit in the first streetcarline running through the roadways of an actual town.

In 1832 New York City saw its first horse cars (as Americans term horse trams) and in the next 50 years no fewer than 415 US towns and cities followed suit, bringing the total mileage of tram tracks to 6,000 miles. It is nostalgia for this past which has seen the various Disney resorts around the world including modern replicas of horse trams in their 'Main Street USA' thoroughfares.

No doubt many American tourists would think it fantastic that, in the Isle of Man, it is still possible to travel on

an original, continuously-operated horse tram system, if only more effort were made to make them aware of its existence.

Returning to the 19th century, it took much longer for the idea of the street tram to gain acceptance in the UK. That it did so is down to two determined Americans who based themselves at Birkenhead.

Today this may seem an odd choice, but we must remember that in the mid-19th century neighbouring Liverpool had risen to become the pre-eminent port of Great Britain and, in particular, was the gateway for transatlantic liners to and from New York.

What is more, cotton grown on the plantations of the

southern US states featured high on the list of raw materials used by the Lancashire textile mills that played such a large part in making Manchester a powerhouse of the industrial revolution - and which fed the Isle of Man's 19th-century tourism boom.

In 1860 one of these American entrepreneurs, appropriately named George Francis Train, built a horse tram system in Birkenhead. His rolling stock was supplied by a George Starbuck, another American from Boston who had clearly moved over in the hope that Britain would 'wake up and smell the coffee' when it came to streetcars. But when Train tried to build a similar line in London, he ended up being jailed for 'breaking and injur-



Summer Hill Stables in Douglas, where the buildings remain operational, including the smithy

Family silver would not be a good move

ing the highway'. It was only in 1870 - just seven years before the Summer Hill Stables were built in Douglas - that the law was changed, making it easier to build street tramways in British towns.

This was just at the height of tourism growth in the Isle of Man, at a time when it was gaining both greater legislative independence and responsibility for its own financial affairs.

The flip side of Lancashire's industrial boom was crowded towns and cities with air heavy with smoke from the mills and factories. What a relief, then, to be able to use Parliamentary penny-a-mile rail travel and Liverpool's shipping links to visit

the Isle of Man for a week or two a year, to enjoy its breezy climate, fresh air and pure sunlight.

It is to this that we owe the character of Douglas as we see it today, with its promenades and terraces of hotels and tall residential buildings - and the horse trams have long been part of that character.

In 1876, just six years after the first London horse tram ran, a Sheffield civil engineer named Thomas Lightfoot, who had decided to retire to the island, realised that horse trams would be a good way of getting tourists from the steamers at Victoria Pier (where the Sea Terminal now stands) to their hotels.

Authorised by Tynwald, the first stage of the horse tram

line was a single track from the foot of Summer Hill to the Iron Pier, opposite the end of Broadway. Starbuck Car & Wagon Co of Birkenhead were conveniently accessible to build the first two double-deck tramcars and in 1877 - the year that the current stables were built - the line was extended to Victoria Pier.

By 1885, 350,000 passengers a year were being carried and three years later that figure rose to half a million after much of the line was made double track.

Now, in its 140th anniversary year - at a time when the network of preserved heritage railways in the UK is ever-growing and history-related TV programmes and attractions are enormously popular

elsewhere - the tramway has only narrowly escaped closure, thanks to the efforts of determined campaigners and a temporary takeover of operations by the government.

What is more, only the intervention of Tynwald has stopped the line being truncated at the promenade War Memorial.

In Oxford, a Victorian horse tram has just been painstakingly restored and given pride of place in the city's museum, while the Beamish living history museum in the North East of England has salvaged some old horse tram bodies with the aim of making them long-term restoration projects. In South Australia, the horse tramway at Victor Harbor has been carefully

recreated as a tourist attraction - something which also happened in the German town of Döbeln in 2007.

Yet in the last few weeks Douglas Council has had no qualms about putting six original 1890s and 1902 trams up for auction as 'surplus' (thankfully individuals and groups have acted to keep at least some from leaving the island) - and now, with what some have termed 'indecent haste' they have put the historic stables on the market with the aim of sacrificing them to developers.

Surely this would not be necessary were the Isle of Man to take more active steps to promote its unique heritage attractions to draw in more visitors. Ruth Goodman and

the Victorian and Edwardian Farm heritage programmes team have just finished their BBC series *Full Steam Ahead*, showcasing the contribution that the railway made to British life and the country's wealth of preserved railways. Imagine what it could do to island tourism if they were allowed to show Manx men and women operating state-run Victorian horsedrawn, steam and electric trains through the island's picturesque landscape using the same equipment and buildings used by generations of their forebears.

If the island would only raise its profile to attract more visitors then it would not need to be selling off the 'family silver' of its heritage.