

# BUILDINGS AT RISK

Heritage

# Finding ways to conserve our valuable buildings

*Dave Martin and Frank Cowin of the Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society highlight the important part that buildings play in our landscape and heritage*

## Feature

**W**ith the start of a new Tynwald, now is a good time to highlight the important part that buildings play in our landscape and heritage.

Numerous reports have highlighted the importance of the environment and our history/heritage/landscape – both to the island for visitors, business and new residents, and more generally on wellbeing and quality of life for all.

The Isle of Man has a tremendously rich heritage, and our buildings are an essential part of that – they make the island recognisable and distinct, and we need to find ways of sustainably conserving them where possible and practical.

### A CONTINUING STORY

**T**he tapestry of these buildings has evolved over time, and that evolution itself tells a story – it is a living story, and it needs to continue as a live story.

In many ways, the stories to be read from our built heritage (tholtans to castles, mine buildings to churches) are like a library.

Some regimes over the ages have been notorious for promoting book burning, and in a way we have seen that with buildings in the island where ‘it’s old so it must go’ was a near-absolute dictum.

Books need to be read – not just locked in an archive vault out of sight.

Ripping a handful of pages, or even two or three chapters out of a book, breaks the story.

Substituting pages from another book, even if they have the same page numbers, breaks the story.

Again, just like a library without a catalogue – someone may say ‘we’ve plenty copies of that book, so it



Cregneash – approximately 100 years ago and now, showing the importance of space and how sympathetic updating can be accommodated

(Manx National Heritage)

doesn't matter if we lose one or throw that tired one out – but we can then end up where there aren't any copies left in the library.

### AWARENESS

**I**magine a copy of the Chronicles of Mann in with a box of old/scrap books – we wouldn't expect an average reader to recognise it.

Buildings that are registered are already flagged up as important; but many important buildings (if not the majority) are not. It is critical that our professionals (planners, architects) are able to recognise what is important.

Resources and training should be available to planning and building control staff to help them to discharge their duties in relation to building conser-

vation, irrespective of whether buildings are registered or not.

Building owners need to be able to recognise the value of their buildings to the island, and qualified information should be available to building owners – irrespective of whether buildings are registered or not – to assist their sustainable stewardship.

We must hope the 'Isle of Architecture' project can help raise awareness of the importance and impact of our built environment among public, professionals and politicians alike.

The island needs a system which supports sustainable conservation of our built heritage, which need not be costly.

We absolutely don't want or need an island 'preserved' – in all honesty we don't

want an island of folk housed solely in tholtans or miners' houses or other buildings unsuited to modern living.

It is a living story – conservation of a building can take many forms. In very rare circumstances it can involve pure preservation; but in almost all cases it will involve some degree of evolution, hopefully giving new life while respecting key features.

It can be: re-use for its original purpose, possibly involving minor modifications; or adaptation/re-modelling for a new use; or retention of key features such as a façade with a modern space behind (such as the old cinema frontage now part of TKMaxx); or in some exceptional circumstances, it may be appropriate to retain a 'romantic shell' to preserve

a historic landscape (as was the case at St Peter's in Peel).

Buildings can't be treated in isolation – a page or two in the middle of a book can't be taken in isolation – it depends on what went before, and sets the scene for what follows.

In a similar way, as well as their internal value, we should always consider the impact of surroundings on a building and of a building on its surroundings. Space matters too – we have 'white space' to make it easier to read text – 30,000 words without a blank line would be unreadable!

A four-storey house added to the end of a two-storey terrace clearly upsets the appearance; but it doesn't have to be whole houses that are out of place – even one house inappropriately rendered

or spar-dashed or veneered with faux bricks/stone can break their original harmony.

### IMPACT OF SPACE AND RHYTHM

**A**ll text is broken up into sentences. The end of each sentence gives a pause for breath. Passages of text have rhythm. Sometimes rhythm is repetitive – and replacing one sentence with a disharmonious one can break that rhythm.

The same can be said of buildings – we don't have the grand crescents of Bath, but their rhythm was part of the design and is carefully maintained, as are the remaining original terraces on Douglas promenade.

We also need to consider a



Our Lady, Star of the Sea in Ramsey - an example of the early work of Sir Giles Gilbert Scott who went on to design the iconic red telephone box, Liverpool's Anglican Cathedral and Battersea Power Station

building's effect on the wider landscape. Even large structures can be slotted into the landscape with care - using sympathetic materials and finishes, and avoiding excessive height, massing, hard landscaping, floodlighting and approach road lighting.

Erection of a new building should not mean the automatic demolition of an existing traditional building/dwelling.

Regional distinctions within the island are important, and in the past were governed by available materials and its transport, which has led to distinct styles in different areas across the island.

Currently there seems to be an attempt, well under way, to make all the town and village centres bland copies of each other. For example the same paving as being laid in London in the last few years. Planning needs to not only take account of build-

ings in the context of the Isle of Man but also of regional distinctions.

Sometimes it is not what a building is like architecturally, but who lived there, designed it, or what happened there.

This would include buildings such as the house occupied by Captain John Quilliam, or buildings designed by important architects like Baillie Scott and Sir Giles Gilbert Scott; railway buildings, mill and mine buildings, among many others.

Demolition, which is by its very nature the ultimate form of alteration to a building, is at present a free-for-all unless a building is registered, is in a conservation area, or attached to another building.

Surely all demolition should be subject to some form of control?

We need government/politicians, planners and

developers to recognise and value all our built heritage by: encouraging community involvement, and providing suitable educational opportunities for all; recognising the importance and impact of changes to the Manx built environment; being prepared to accept flexible options to allow sustainable re-use or sensitive re-purposing.

And we need government and planners to: provide support and guidance to owners and developers; operate a transparent registration process, independent from planning and executive government; control demolition

As citizens of the island we can make full use of all opportunities provided for us, and: explore and value our built heritage and encourage others to do so; be prepared to accept flexible options to allow sustainable re-use or sensitive re-purposing; be involved and inform local authorities and government of what we value; encourage and support government to achieve this; keep others informed of buildings felt to be at risk from neglect, inappropriate modification or demolition, so appropriate action can be taken; be vocal when it does not happen.

Almost every candidate's election manifesto stressed the importance of the island's heritage.

The built environment is a key part of that heritage - we all need to play our part in looking after it.



St Peter's in Peel - a 'romantic ruin' to preserve an historic landscape

(Peter Killey)



The Old Mill, Port Grenagh - successfully converted into a modern house whilst preserving the character of the original building

## What is registration?

It is the Manx version of 'listing' in the UK.

It adds a building to the Protected Buildings Register, where permission is required for works which otherwise wouldn't need planning permission. Registration is determined solely on a building's architectural or historic importance - neither development nor commercial considerations should have any role in Building

Registration. It should give access to advice from a conservation officer. It should give access to grants and/or other financial support. Registration absolutely doesn't stop evolution of a building - what it does do is provide an extra layer of scrutiny; it can also extend that protection to the immediate surroundings so any changes which might affect the context can also receive scrutiny.