

BUILDINGS AT RISK

Heritage

Seafront's jewel in crown boasts a fascinating past

The Gaiety Theatre and Villa Marina may now exist in perfect unity in Douglas but both buildings have their own compelling historical backgrounds, as Simon Artymiuk explains

Feature

Today the Gaiety Theatre and Villa Marina together make up what appears to be an attractive complex and 'jewel in the crown' of Douglas's seafront.

However, they evolved quite separately, although both stand on the site of a lodge occupied in the early 19th century by Castle Mona architect and Atholl family retainer George Steuart, and then later bought by benefactor Henry Bloom Noble and donated for recreational use.

THE GAITY'S STORY

When the Gaiety Theatre was built at the turn of the 20th century, it incorporated elements of the old Villa Marina house with the shell of an earlier entertainment hall called the Pavilion.

The Pavilion had been built in 1893 at the height of the island's tourism boom and was owned by Richard Maltby Broadbent, the man who turned Groudie Glen into pleasure gardens and had its little railway built. The idea was that the entertainment hall would match the theatres and dance halls Victorians had come to expect in rival resorts such as Blackpool.

To create the space needed a 'Belfast Roof' was built, meaning a barrel vaulted roof was formed from iron sections bolted together into huge hoops which were then reinforced and faced with laminated wood like a ship's hull – in effect a giant Nissen hut.

It wasn't a success and closed after only six seasons. Richard Broadbent then sold it.

The new owners, the Pavilion, the Palace and the Derby Castle Company, realised the theatre needed a makeover and in 1899 went straight to the top designer in the field to accomplish the job. Frank Matcham had been born in 1854 in



The Gaiety Theatre pre and post restoration



Newton Abbot, Devon, as son of a well-to-do brewery owner. However, after a good education in Torquay – another rapidly rising holiday resort – he had been taken on an apprentice by local architect George S Bridgeman.

His flair for theatre design then saw him moving to London to work for Jethro T Robinson, consulting theatre architect to the Lord Chamberlain. Matcham married Robinson's daughter

Maria and then inherited the practice, becoming in the late 1870s and 80s the most fashionable and sought-after theatre architect in Britain.

Frank Matcham presented his plans for the theatre to Douglas Corporation in March 1899 and work began that summer. He then set about creating a new light, elegant and playful interior inside the narrow shell of the Pavilion's Belfast Roof and the remains

of the Villa house. The stage was extended by 42ft and the resulting loss of seating was made up for by enlarging the circle and adding a third level.

The under-stage machinery was installed by the Douglas firm of JL Killip & Collister, of Tynwald Street.

The new entrance facade, with its upstairs loggia, pedimented towers and flamboyant stucco decoration, took its inspiration from buildings of the Italian Renaissance, while the interior, with its ceiling

ornate plasterwork, combined Baroque and Elizabethan elements. An ingenious feature also found in Matcham's theatre at Buxton in Derbyshire is a 'sunburner' – a main roof air vent about a large circular glass window in which there was originally a gaslight. As the window heated up, it caused the air around it to rise and then fresh air would rush in through the vent to replace it. This was important in a



Gaiety Theatre designer Frank Matcham



The Gaiety's glass ceiling

venue built to accommodate large number of people and at a time when smoking was commonplace.

The theatre – which opened on July 16, 1900, with a performance of *The Telephone Girl*, starring Miss Ada Blanch – was hailed by contemporaries as 'sufficiently grandiose to appeal to the upper end of the market' yet 'perfectly designed to accommodate the masses' and 'provide them with a temple of the illusory'. The two classes were kept apart by the provision of separate entrances!

The theatre was a great success up until the 1914 outbreak of the First World War, but then much harder times set in, despite attempts to attract customers by installing cin-

ema equipment in the 1920s and even an ice rink for a show in 1938.

The Second World War period and aftermath saw deterioration of the building outside the means of the owners to repair. At one point in around 1970 the theatre came 'just one signature away' from being demolished. Fortunately, the Isle of Man Government decided it needed to be saved as a 'public service' and in 1971 Tynwald approved its purchase from the Palace and Derby Castle Company for £41,000. It also granted a further £9,000 for essential repairs, as the circle bar, toilets and stage all needed a revamp. The architect, theatre expert and historian Victor Glasstone was consulted and insisted that the

theatre was such a supreme and unmodernised example of Matcham's work that attempts should be made to restore it to its original condition.

Five years later, however, Mannin Entertainments freed themselves from the contract to do the job because they found the costs would far outstrip any profits the theatre could generate. The government therefore had to step in to take over.

In 1978 the organisation Friends of the Gaiety was formed to help attract larger audiences to the theatre as well as undertake fundraising. In 1984 Mervin Stokes became manager and, after discussions with Victor Glasstone and consultant Dr David Wilmore, pressed ahead with fully restoring the theatre.

The following year saw the first Manx Last Night of the Proms being held to help raise funds and in 1990 a subcommittee of the Friends was formed to help achieve the objective of completing the theatre's restoration to 1900 condition in time for its centenary.

Despite a major setback in 1998 when water seeped into part of the theatre, causing damage, this objective was

Comment

Importance of 'Registration' and 'Conservation Area' status

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making up the 'aura' can be perceived as hugely detrimental to that status.

Conservation Areas, however, are not the means by which to preserve open agricultural land or wildlife habitats from development, although they may incorporate some such land between buildings.

How should the public view the designations? Registration is a reflection of quality and/or uniqueness or rarity.

In the UK they are valued, while unfortunately in the island they are frequently the subject of bitter controversy and their status is often not advertised favourably if they come on the market.

Upkeep and the cost of repairs are seen as being prohibitive. Sympathy may be afforded to those inheriting such buildings, but not to those purchasing them knowing their importance and quality, and who then complain about maintenance, lack of grants or seek to make undesirable alterations.

But the government could encourage people to value island heritage by removing VAT from renovation work.

The same applies in 'Conservation Areas': what government should not be doing – let alone leading by example in – is encouraging unnecessary demolition of buildings in either status.

Heritage buildings and areas should be perceived a valuable resource for attracting economic activity, including tourism. The commitment to this and appropriate training of town planners, wherever deployed in government, is also essential.

The public can also help. Peel commissioner and former MHK Hazel Hannan has drawn attention to the Oxford Character Assessment Toolkit; this helps people to identify what it is they like about a locality including its buildings: https://www.oxford.gov.uk/info/20193/character_assessment_toolkit

Completed forms could be sent to commissioners and/or planning policy division at Cabinet Office to make them aware what are the characteristics of your area you feel most strongly about. Government clearly needs reminding that it is a signatory to the European Convention for the Protection of the Architectural Heritage of Europe.

For further information, contact secretary@manxantiquarians.com

The Gaiety Theatre, which is Registered, and Villa Marina, which forms part of a Conservation Area, are examples of buildings given different designations in planning terms under the Town & Country Planning Act 1999.

So why is this?

Designed throughout by a renowned theatre architect, being the best intact survival example of his work, the Gaiety deteriorated but has been revived to its original design by the hard work and fundraising of the Friends of the Gaiety and Government.

Ongoing protection for this is essential, whoever manages it.

Registration should prevent alterations adversely impacting on extant original design of those buildings and structures perceived to be excellent examples of vernacular or architect-designed architecture be they houses, mills, pubs, halls, bridges, farms, etc. It does not prevent any alteration or change of use which may be encouraged to 'save' a building redundant in terms of its original use.

In contrast, the Villa, built around 1913, was significantly altered externally in the 1930s in a manner not considered to represent the overall quality of the original, so Registration was inappropriate.

However, with its backdrop of brooughs and a watchtower, and with its gardens including the former power house and lodge, all protected from the sea by the arcade, and the combination of open space and the buildings in it each representing different periods of the history of the area, were all considered factors making it of sufficient importance to warrant its inclusion within The Promenades Conservation Area.

Elsewhere in Douglas, other Conservation Areas reflect the terraced housing approaches to and around the squares, the former stable areas at the corners and their central gardens.

Generally but not exclusively designated in settlements, the aim is to retain the public perceived 'aura' of the locality, not to be needlessly prescriptive about alterations being made to individual properties.

As has been recently noted in Peel and Laxey, change of materials and removal of structures



The Villa Marina, which forms part of the Promenades Conservation Area, over the years and how it looks today

achieved – and a performance of that first 1900 show, The Telephone Girl, staged to mark the event.

Another triumph has been the rescuing of Victorian theatre equipment from elsewhere – including the only operating 'Corsican trap' in Britain. Once a common feature in British theatres and named after a play called the Corsican Brothers, this contraption incorporating a small platform, rails and rollers allows an actor to rise ghostlike through a trapdoor in the stage and then glide across it.

THE VILLA'S STORY

The buildings now referred to as the Royal Hall at the Villa Marina was built 13 years after the Gaiety Theatre at a time when Douglas Corporation was seeking to attract a 'better class' of visitor. The architect of the large new octagonal entertainment venue was Alban Jones and the design had been chosen in an open competition judged by Professor Adshhead of Liverpool University.

Its original name was the Villa Marina Kursaal – this being a German word for an entertainment venue at a spa. This attempt at sophistication, to get away from the town's reputation as a 'working class'

seaside resort, unfortunately backfired the following year when the outbreak of the First World War saw a rise in anti-German feeling across Britain, so it was soon rechristened as the Royal Hall.

The exterior was originally of unstuccoed brick and it looked more severe and angular than it does today. Inside its 100ft wide and 66ft high

auditorium was originally designed for the staging of concerts but it could be easily adapted to other uses too. The coffered ceiling has a hint of the Pantheon in Rome about it, or at least an Edwardian interpretation of it. Post-cards of the period show that on fine days concerts were sometimes staged outside on a bandstand, too.

After the First World War the idea of linking the Gaiety Theatre to the Royal Hall with the Villa Marina gardens was developed, but these were not completed until 1931. The landscaper was F Prentice Mawson of Thomas H Mawson & Sons of Lancaster.

Over time, various modern additions were made to the Villa Marina buildings which looked incongruous and out of keeping, but in the early 2000s, thanks to the vision of Manx architect the late Ian Brown, they were given a major refurbishment which reorientated the main entrance to the gardens side of the Villa.

His scheme also retained the best aspects of the Royal Hall while helping the buildings to harmonise better both with the gardens and the restored Gaiety Theatre and modernising the facilities on offer.

A stainless steel profile above the entrance of Henry Bloom Noble, designed by Manxman Bryan Kneale, helps us to remember the generous bequest of land which made the whole complex possible.

The result, to my mind, looks better than the Villa's original appearance and these buildings together comprise a real gem of the Isle of Man and an inspiring example to be followed by building restorers.



A postcard depicting Villa Marina grounds and Kursaal, Douglas



Villa Marina, with a busy Douglas beach in the foreground