

BUILDINGS AT RISK

Hall

Wesleyan Chapel transformed into 21st century arts venue

Methodist preacher John Crook came to the island in the 1770s and soon established a permanent presence

Feature

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Isle of Man Victorian Society

Peel was in the vanguard of the introduction of Methodism to the Isle of Man in the 1770s, at a time of laxity among the Anglican clergy in the island.

In February 1775, the Liverpool Society sent its first Methodist preacher, the Rev John Crook, to the island, a man who had converted to the movement while serving in the British Army in Limerick, Ireland.

In the Isle of Man he made his headquarters in Peel, a town where he was made especially welcome at a time when the established Church authorities often shunned Methodists or sent trouble-makers to break up their services.

Crook held meetings in a small thatched summerhouse in the grounds of Mount Morrison which had formerly been used as a watchtower by smugglers due to its views over Peel bay.

Although his initial stay was only for six months before he had to return to Liverpool, Crook's preaching took root and in 1777 the Peel Society was the first Methodist group in the island



The Wesleyan Centenary Hall in a pre-First World War photograph

to build its own chapel, to be soon followed by others in Lonan in 1780, at Ballakaneen in Andreas in 1782 and eventually in Douglas (where Methodists had been given a

rough ride by locals) in 1786. This success was largely thanks to Methodist founder John Wesley responding to pleas from Manx Methodists by stationing the Rev Crook

in Whitehaven so that he could make regular visits back to the island using the regular sailing packet service from that port to Douglas.

Probably thanks to Crook, in 1777 John Wesley himself made the first of two visits to the Isle of Man, with large crowds gathering to hear this famous preacher, including a meeting on the slopes of South Barrule where he made many converts.

On his second visit in 1781, Wesley preached twice in Peel - once at 5am on a Monday and then returning for an evening service on the following Wednesday - and said of the townsfolk's hymn-singing: 'I have not heard better singing in Bristol or London. Many, both men and women, have admirable voices and they sing with good judgment. Who would have thought this in the Isle of Man?'

Wesley also praised the abilities of the island's preachers who used both

Manx and English in their services and said: 'We have no such circuit as this either in England, Scotland or Wales.'

Remarkably, by 1784 there were 2,124 Methodists recorded in the island and the movement continued to grow to have a very strong presence in the Isle of Man - and especially in Peel. The first chapel in the town's Atholl Street was built in 1839, together with a small meeting room across the yard at the side.

The Guild Room, as this meeting room was called, became regarded as inadequate and in 1875 the townsfolk decided to mark the centenary of the foundation of the Wesleyan movement in the island by building a much larger hall across the road. This Wesleyan Centenary Hall was a sizeable undertaking: it had two entrances and a grand and ornate Classical facade. The Centenary Hall was also

used as an entertainment centre in Peel for almost 100 years, with concerts, plays, eisteddfods, talks, gardening shows and jumble sales all periodically taking place.

The first concert for which there are any details was 'a Visitors' Concert' on August 6, 1889, to raise money for the Peel Brass Band Instruments Fund.

In 1913 the Centenary Hall was extended by the building of what is now called the Atholl Room to provide a home for the Chapel Sunday School. The building originally had a low wall and ornate cast iron railings at the front, which gave the hall some privacy and dignity. but these were removed to be melted down to help the war effort during the First World War.

By the 1980s, the Atholl Room had become home to the Footprints Youth Club, while the main hall was used for badminton and the Peel Pantaloons group. In the



A view of the main facade of the Peel Centenary Centre as it looks today in 2016 (Bill Quine)





Two views of the hall in use, one showing members of the Sunday School and the other the Peel Sisterhood (Manx National Heritage iMuseum)



The interior of the hall while work on its refurbishment was under way

early 2000s, the Pantaloons committee discovered that the chapel authorities were thinking of selling the hall, but that some of the congregation hoped that it would remain in community use and would not be just converted into flats or shops. It was realised that a structured group was vital to raise funds, buy the hall(s) and do all the necessary work needed to turn the whole complex into a performing arts centre.

Six directors were appointed, loans secured and the huge amount of voluntary work required was started.

In October 2003, the Peel Centenary Centre opened in its new guise as an arts venue, despite the fact that facilities were poor: the hall floor was flat and

audiences had difficulty in seeing the stage - plus there was only one toilet for both the artists and the audience! Since those early and challenging days, extra dressing rooms for artists and performers have

been built, along with five additional, and very welcome, toilets. The latest addition has been the reception room and bar, built with funding from local inventor and entrepreneur the late Cyril Cannell in memory of his parents.

New raked seating, giving excellent viewing, has transformed the theatre, along with LED theatre lighting and a high-quality sound system, which attracts performers from all over the world for events such as the Yn Chruinnaght interceltic festival.

A Wednesday evening monthly film club has proved to be highly successful, as has an art group, and there are many regular bookings for each of the two rooms.

The wish of some of the chapel congregation in those early days, that the hall should be for community use, has come true!



Restoration work under way on the building's facade



The Brickworks office as it was and now as a thriving transport museum

## Brickworks office a perfect example of a recycled building

The small brickworks office in Mill Road, Peel, was constructed in 1926 by the Peel Brickworks Company and is situated at the northern tip of the works' land adjacent to its entrance from the road, which was guarded by locked gates at night.

Drivers of lorries coming to, or leaving, the brickworks area had to report to the office when they passed it and all the administration for the works was done in the office, which had just two rooms.

The larger room was the works manager's domain and, to show his status, had a herringbone parquet floor. The smaller room was used by the clerical staff.

The manual workers (there was little mechanisation) came inside the office lobby to collect their wages through a small opening window. The lobby floor was, and still is, quarry-tiled and easy to clean.

The small fireplaces in each room provided the only heating. Obviously there was a good supply of fuel as the brickworks' furnaces were fired by coal which came by boat to Peel from North Wales.

When the brickworks was demolished in the 1980s to make way for the new power station, somehow the dimin-

utive office survived, albeit boarded up and abandoned. Holes in the roof meant that, after 20 years, all the ceilings were down, the toilet was vandalised and the wooden floors had rotted.

Two members of Peel Heritage Trust felt that the building could be used as an 'industrial heritage museum'. Manx National Heritage, the new owners of all the land, including the office, was contacted and said that the cost of refurbishment of the property would be in the region of £15,000 to £20,000.

The Peel Heritage Trust committee then decided not to pursue the matter and demolition seemed imminent. Then, at the 11th hour, the Manx Transport Museum Group agreed a five-year lease on the office and work started.

Local firm Street Heritage fully restored the roof facing the road with new felt and battens. Some tiles from the rear roof were then used - all at no cost. The rear roof was boarded and fibreglassed by the group as a temporary measure. This measure lasted for about 10 years but then started to leak. Peel Heritage Trust then kindly offered to help fund the tiling of the rear roof with new tiles of a near perfect match to those

at the front. Nearly all the refurbishment has been done by the museum's volunteers: new ceilings, rewiring and plumbing have all been done by the group.

The members have excellent co-operation and encouragement from the landlords, Manx National Heritage, and the body has provided some equipment and the funds to upgrade the kitchen and toilet areas.

The former brickworks office is only seven yards square and would surely qualify as the smallest transport museum in Britain. It houses two motorcycles and an original P50 car built in Peel, as well as many other items of transport memorabilia.

There is also a railway display maintained by the museum on the opposite side of the road, with the original water tower and an early four-wheeled Isle of Man Railway passenger carriage - the Douglas to Peel line was the first to open in 1873 using such carriages.

The museum is open on weekend afternoons during the summer, so go along and pay it a visit, or join the volunteers for the annual transport rally, which usually takes place on Peel Carnival day.