Commercial buildings in the island are to be revered as well

When it opened on June 9, 1902, the opulence of the new Isle of Man Banking Company Ltd building gave confidence to the public.

The banking hall before the alterations of 1993 showing the original counter position with security grilles added. Note the black and white marble tiles which are still beneath the carpet. The double doors at the far end lead in to the 1937 extension. Inset, The interior of the bank following the alterations of 1993 when the curved counter was repositioned further back into the banking hall.

David Swinton's hardwood carving based on the Earl of Derby's crest was repositioned from high up on the screen to a display recess on the left of this picture.
set off on a trip to England to view recently constructed banks.

Upon their return, it was agreed that the new building should be built in granite and a shortlist of architects who had been involved in bank buildings was produced.

Approaches were made to five architects including Alfred Waterhouse, architect of the famous Manchester Town Hall and many of the large office buildings of the Refuge Assurance Company in many of the cities of England. Only two architects submitted plans in competition and the winning architect was Marshall Mackenzie of Aberdeen.

Tenders were sought from five local builders and the successful tenderer was RF Douglas at £11,903 which had to be added £5,450 for the supply of the granite from John Morgan of Aberdeen, who provided all the stones ready-dressed and numbered on site.

When it opened on June 9, 1903, its opulence gave confidence to the Manx public following the disastrous crash of Dumbell’s Bank two years earlier. Its marble-walled banking hall with decorative glass dome and impressive curved mahogany counter was, and has continued to be, the finest interior of any building on the Isle of Man.

Recently, customers of the bank were handed a leaflet showing proposals to strip out the counters, break openings through walls and install self-service machines to create a NatWest Bank in one end and an Isle of Man Bank in the other.

In 1993, the bank was praised in the local publication ‘Focus’ when they very carefully moved the full length of counter back by about 10 feet to provide a larger circulation area for the public and in so doing resisted the strong temptation of applying a coat of the corporate image of its parent company.

Now, the proposals are looked on by many as cutting the flagship of the fleet, but what do the guardians of our built heritage, the planners, think? A planning application was made on June 7 this year by the Royal Bank of Scotland Group plc to replace external signage, install an external ramp at the Prospect Hill door, to remove the teller counters and open the banking hall.

To the surprise of most people, the bank is not registered and so was not afforded any special protection. Somewhere within the planning office the decision was made to advertise and deal with the application as two separate applications; one for the ramp and signage (16/00678/16) and the other for the signage (16/00671/16).

Thus, what could be looked upon as a dramatic alteration to the interior was kept from the knowledge of the public for it was officially removed from the application.

As it was not advertised, the public were denied the opportunity to make comment, yet the bank had included it as part of the application. A look at the information held online shows the bank offered the counter to The Friends of the Gaiety to use as a bar and they accepted. However, The Gaiety is a Registered Building, therefore Registered Building Consent is necessary and ‘The Friends’ are not the owners of The Gaiety, nor in a position to accept the counter on behalf of the owners. Also, on file is correspondence by the planning officer advising that the former conservation officer was content with the proposals. Planning approval for the ramp and signage was given by an officer under ‘delegated authority’ and issued on November 24, but it did not include the interior alterations.

It may be argued that planning approval is not necessary for internal alterations, yet the planning office included on their planning list 16/00649/B ‘Internal alterations and refurbishment including increased opening for new entrance and replacements of glazed shop front, Isle of Man Bank, 2- Regent Street, Douglas’ and gave Approval on September 8. No official extraction of part of the application there. Surely it should be a case of ‘sauce for the goose is...’.

The Athol Street application for RIBA membership in 1896, Mackenzie had as one of his proposers Alfred Waterhouse, the UK’s greatest architect of commercial buildings. In 1902 he took his son Alexander-Georges Robertson Mackenzie into partnership under the title of A. Marshall Mackenzie and Son. In his book ‘Temples of Man’ the architecture of banking’, John Booker includes the Isle of Man Bank in an appendix of ‘Significant Banks’. He says: ‘It should have been a shock to mainland bankers that the directors of the Isle of Man Banking Company, searching Britain in 1899 for an exemplar on which to base their new premises at Douglas, decided to follow the French neo-classical lines of an assurance company’s office in Aberdeen, commissioning the same architect.’

At Athol Street, Mackenzie achieved opulence by using Norwegian, Light Rouge, Royal and Pavonazzo marble on the walls and a floor of Dove and white Sicilian marble laid checkerboard-style in the public area of the banking hall, as well as rich polished mahogany and oak for the woodwork. Until two weeks ago, this magnificent interior was intact. The bank was correctly described by Pat Tutt in her book as ‘one of the island’s best and most admired works of architecture’.

Mackenzie went on to design the fabulous Waldorf Hotel and the fabulous Aldwych, London. The building of his design for Canada House was thwarted by the outbreak of The Great War. He was one of the best commercial building architects of his time and yet we appear to be destroying the best of his works in the Isle of Man by ‘delegated authority’.

Biography: Alexander Marshall Mackenzie 1848-1933

Marshall Mackenzie was born at Elgin, Scotland. His father, Thomas, was an architect, but died when his son was six. After education at Elgin Academy, Aberdeen and Edinburgh, Marshall was articled to his father’s former partner James Matthews in 1863.

Seven years later, at the age of 22, he set up his own practice, following a study tour of Italy and France. He rejoined James Matthews in 1877, but as a partner, and ran the Elgin and Aberdeen offices. By 1893 he was the sole principal of the firm which had been responsible for the design of the head office of the Northern Assurance Co (which had an incredible likeness to the JOM Bank, Athol Street); several branches of the North of Scotland Bank; the Central Public Library, Aberdeen; the Grand Hotel, Aberdeen; work at Balmoral Castle and at Mar Lodge for the Duke of Fife; a number of buildings at Aberdeen University as well as many war memorials across Scotland.

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