

BUILDINGS AT RISK

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

Feature

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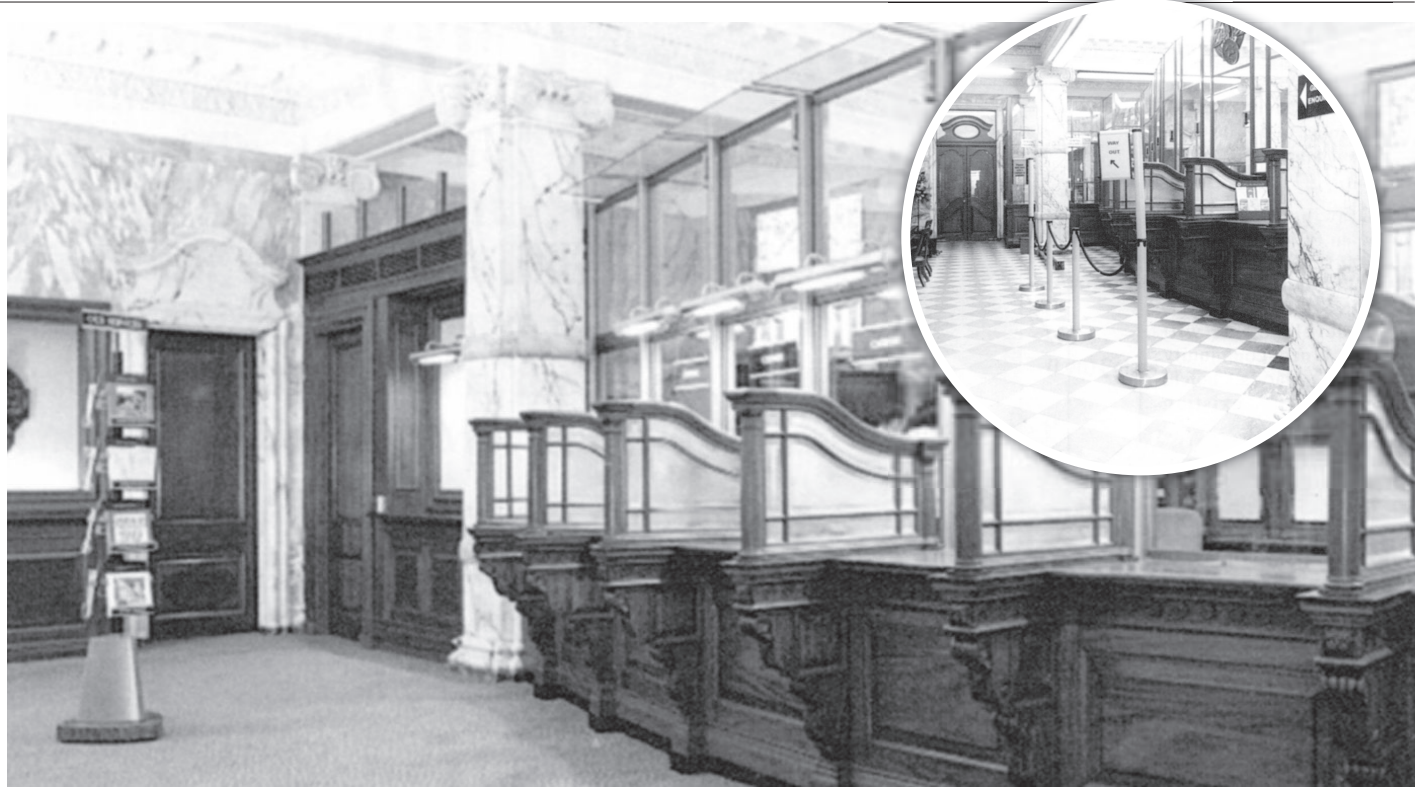
Over the years, the interest by the Manx public in their built heritage has grown. It was undoubtedly kindled by the 'Kelly's Eye' series, which ran on Manx Radio for more than 20 years from 1987.

Then there was the 'Streets of Douglas' articles that were published in the Isle of Man Examiner every week during 1996.

Of more recent times, Jonathan Kewley's book 'The Churches of Mann' gave a marvellous insight into the history and architecture of our island churches, while Pat Tutt's massive tome 'An Introduction to the Architecture of the Isle of Man' has been well praised for the wonderful photographs showing the delights of the buildings around us.

Visiting groups with an interest in buildings are now well familiar with the work of the great ecclesiastical architects Ewan Christian, Joseph Henry Christian, Henry Clutton, JL Pearson, Giles Gilbert Scott and WD Caröe, all of whom designed churches here.

Their churches in the island are, however, so different to their work in England as here they were working to



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

scale of population and economy. Our leading domestic architects are also well-known: Baillie Scott, Armitage Rigby, and Brameld and Smith of Manchester, who designed all the Arts and Crafts houses at 'The Colony', Port Lewaigue, on the

outskirts of Ramsey. Not so well-known, however, is the identity of some of the architects of our commercial buildings, yet some of them are well-known and revered beyond these shores. The first purpose-designed bank in the island was

the work of Ewan Christian for the Isle of Man Commercial Banking Company and was built during 1846. It stood on Prospect Hill, and in fact still does, although much altered at roof and ground floor level. It is now occupied by 'Financial Options'.

The second purpose-designed bank was The Bank of Mona, higher up the hill at the junction with Finch Road. In 1977 it was nicknamed 'The Wedding Cake', a name that has stayed with it.

Following the forced closure of the bank in 1878,

due to the failure of its parent bank in Scotland, it was purchased by the Manx government and has been part of Government Offices ever since. The architect of this imposing classical pile was the local self-taught architect, John Robinson.

The next bank to be built (1860-1) was at the bottom of Prospect Hill; it was the Douglas and Isle of Man Bank, later to become Dumbell's, then Parrs Bank and finally it ended up as NatWest through a series of names incorporating the word Westminster.

This building, with its highly-decorated façade, appears to have been designed by Arthur Holme, a well-respected architect from Liverpool and bears a strong resemblance to his Marlborough House in Bold Street. At the same time, he was working on extensions at King William's College and The Falcon's Nest Hotel at Port Erin.

In 1865, the Isle of Man

Banking Company Limited was founded and opened its doors at 15 Athol Street on November 1 in a property now occupied by a firm of advocates. The bank building was the least attractive of its competitors, having been built as a shop with a house above.

The business was, however, successful and branch offices were opened in Ramsey, Castletown, Peel, Port Erin, Port St Mary and Laxey.

The directors decided to build a flagship head office and the chance came when a large block of rundown property at the junction of Athol Street came up for auction.

The directors' instruction to their manager was quite simple: 'Attend the auction and bid until the directors say to stop.'

The site was purchased in October 1898 for £7,250 and thought was given to the design of the new building.

The manager, the chairman and James Cowle, a local builder-cum-architect,



The bank in its centenary year 1965. In 1937 it was extended to the left which can be discerned by the two windows set together between the pilasters. It was designed by local architect Jos. E. Teare and built by the leading builders of the time Creer Brothers of Douglas using granite from the same quarry as the original building. Note the effects of sixty years of fumes, smoke and the atmosphere on the once 'white' granite



Old buildings ready to be demolished to make way for the new bank after the site was purchased in October 1898 for £7,250



Location of the first Isle of Man Banking Company Limited building at 15 Athol Street Douglas



Northern Assurance Company HQ in Aberdeen dressed for the 1902 Coronation. Note the similarity to the Isle of Man Bank that opened that year

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 to 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 for assembly on site.

When it opened on June 9, 1902, 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 scuttling 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 up 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 (16/00878/B) and the other for the signage (16/00871/D).

Thus, what could be looked upon as a dramatic alteration to the interior 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 16/00849/B 'Internal alterations and refurbishment including increased opening for new entrance and replacements of glazed shop front, Isle of Man Bank, 2-4 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 was considered at 'of-ficer level' and never made it before the planning committee, which has recently demonstrated a regard for our built heritage.

The counter was removed just days after approval was given for the ramp and signage; a case of 'account closed?'

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 IOM 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.

When making his 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 George Robertson Mackenzie into partnership under the title of A. Marshall Mackenzie and Son. In his book 'Temples of Mam-

mon - 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 Australia House, both in the 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'!