

BUILDINGS AT RISK

Court house buildings provide arresting sights around island

The Buildings at Risk series of articles highlights the importance of our built heritage and the impact it has on island life. It covers buildings currently at risk, buildings that have been lost, and buildings that have evolved and been sustainably saved or conserved – and court houses provide examples of all those categories

BY DAVE MARTIN
Isle of Man Natural History
and Antiquarian Society

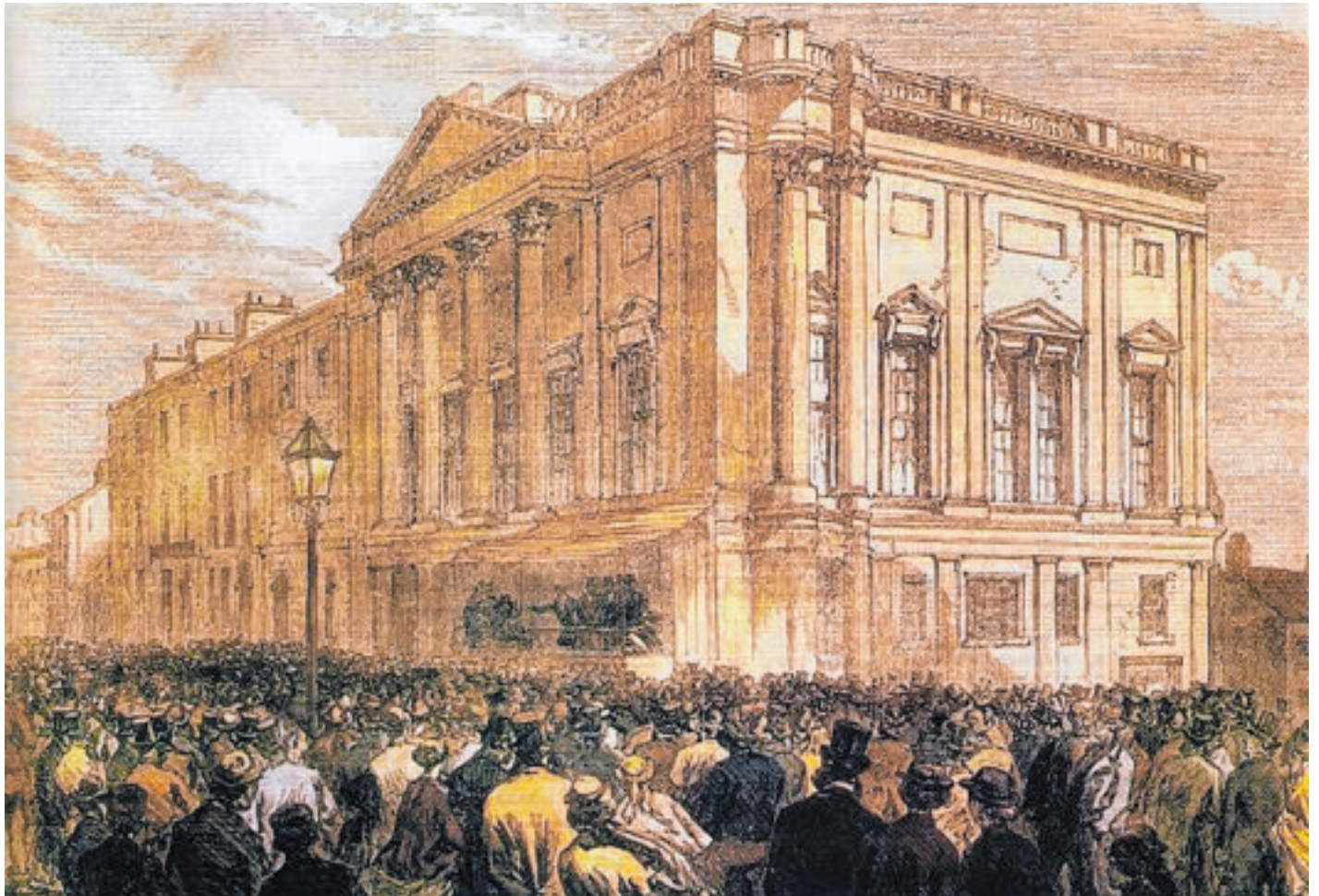
Court houses have played a significant role in island life – not only for individuals who have appeared as defendants and for those who honed their advocacy skills at the bar and went on to public service, but also as the venue for civic and civil functions; and like many other buildings, those housing the courts have evolved too.

Dedicated courthouse buildings are generally a relatively recent phenomenon. The first courts (both civil and ecclesiastical) were held in the open air, although increasingly they were accommodated indoors when a convenient space could be found.

Early church courts had temporal as well spiritual/ ecclesiastical jurisdiction. Parishioners could be 'presented' (arraigned) not only for offences such as immorality, falling asleep in church, taking sand eels or selling milk on a Sunday, and non-payment of tithes; but, until the late 19th century, also for things now dealt with in the civil courts such as drunkenness (not just on Sunday) and family matters including failure to pay support for children and elderly relatives, proving of wills, and debts against deceased estates.

These ecclesiastical courts have long had a natural choice of venue in the many church related sites around the island – sometimes just outside the church, other times inside churches or halls; at Bishopscourt (where Joney Lowney / 'Jinny the Witch?' was tried in 1715); and in the only purpose-built religious courthouse which once stood in Kirk Michael village.

In contrast, a smaller range of dedicated venues existed for the civil courts. Cases and disputes were once heard as part of the Tynwald ceremony, but justice in the hands of the rulers of Mann was often administered from their castle seats of power, and Deemsters sometimes ran Sheading courts from their grand residences - Deemster Moore



Crowds outside Douglas's Athol Street Courthouse for hustings or results of the first democratic House of Keys election in 1866

at Rushen Abbey, Deemster Christian at Milntown.

Whilst there were early lock-ups or gaols in the towns, regional (sheading/ parish) courts, not having their own courthouses, had to meet where they could – sometimes holding their hearings on the site of a crime or dispute, but more often in other halls such as the Mill Barn at Ballasalla, schoolrooms, inns etc.

With the evolution of the Judicial system in the island, including the appointment of the four regional High Bailiffs, it was felt necessary to both improve the facilities and demonstrate the 'majesty of the law', so considerable and increasing amounts were spent on dedicated courthouses.

CASTLETOWN

Castletown has never had a standalone court house but possibly the first dedicated court room was in Castle Rushen. Some of the first formal courts held at Castletown were the two 'court' sittings of Tynwald each year – indeed Tynwald remained the capital court until the early 1800s. Some of the early courts at Castle Rushen were convened in the open air 'without the gates' then in the barbican. Various chambers were used for court business, but by 1791 the then Duke of Athol said they were 'in ruins'. In the 1830s a court room, which remains to this day, was established above the gatehouse, originally with a separate external staircase access. This courtroom has been extended,

re-arranged and re-modelled to improve its operation for dispensing justice. Last used as a courtroom in 2009, until 2015 it was the traditional venue for the swearing-in of each new Lieutenant-Governor.

PEEL

With the dilapidation of the buildings within Peel Castle, the first Peel courthouse was built on Castle Street as early as approximately 1693 – possibly the first dedicated court house on the island.

In the early nineteenth century, it was re-built/extended towards the quay by Thomas Brine, with its main entrance moved to the harbour side, and its 'Black hole' lockup beneath (later to be joined by a Police station). It now houses the Lecece Museum.

Through the late nineteenth century there was increasingly vocal comment on the cramped conditions and squalid basement; and in 1891 a competition was held to design a new courthouse for efficient administration of justice (and promote Peel?). The commission was won by Sussex architect Langton Dennis (who went on to work on Sir Arthur Conan-Doyle's Windlesham Manor in Crowborough). Opened in 1893, the new Peel Courthouse has rich external decoration in the Queen Anne revival style, with Dutch gables and terracotta detail moulded to resemble carved sandstone.

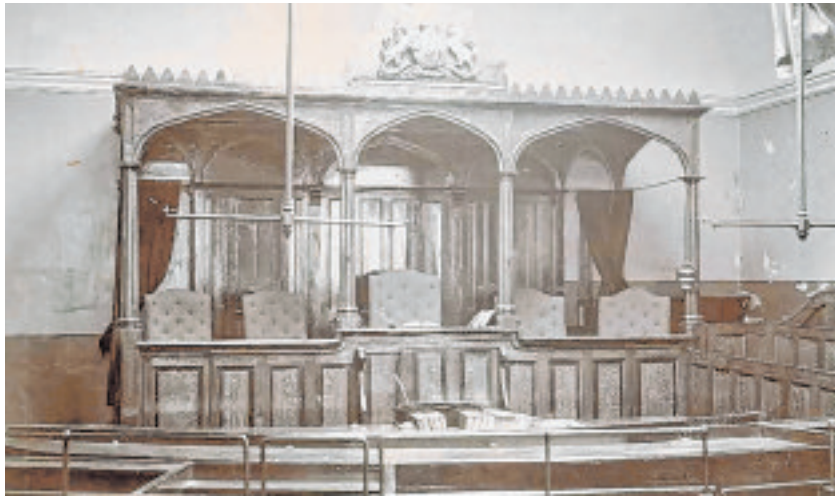
In 1955, part of the building became the police station, and since the centralisation of Courts in Douglas it is now

solely occupied by the Constabulary. The cells remain below!

KIRK MICHAEL

The first and only dedicated ecclesiastical courthouse on the island was commissioned by Bishop Hildesley in Kirk Michael in 1766 – initially ecclesiastical then used for civil justice as well. That building was replaced on the same site by the current castellated building in 1835, designed – like Peel – by Thomas Brine.

The attached cell, known like other local remand cells on the island as 'The Black-hole', was particularly busy when the Michaelmas Fair was held on the fair field behind the Mitre Hotel – customers who had overindulged were



Castletown Courtroom, as remodelled by Thomas Brine (Picture courtesy of the Manx Museum)



A modern view across the harbour to Peel's 'old' courthouse - now the Leece Museum

given a night in the 'cooler' before being dealt with in the courtroom the next day! thence, if sentenced to custody, to Castle Rushen, or after 1891, the Victoria Road Gaol.

Kirk Michael was the last rural courthouse to function and the last hearing held there, by Deemster Johnson, was in about 1950. Since then, it has had several uses for the local and wider community - for House of Keys elections, for Commissioners' elections and meetings, and football changing rooms and as a base for school summer camps from Liverpool and other education authorities.

There have been two unsuccessful attempts to acquire this Registered building to be used as a heritage centre; now vacant and becoming dilapidated, it is on the market again and needs a saviour.



An old photograph of Kirk Michael Courthouse (Picture courtesy of the Manx Museum)

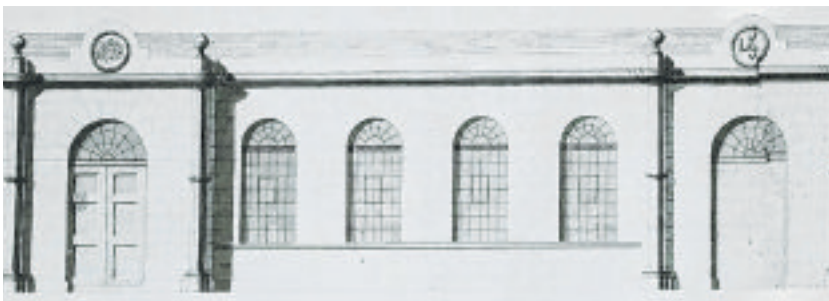


The current internal state of Kirk Michael Courthouse (Chrystals Estate Agents)

DOUGLAS

The first known purpose-built courthouse in Douglas was built in 1795 - as part of a harbour complex at the root of the Red Pier - all to the design of George Steuart (who went on to design the Castle Mona). The Red Pier courthouse remained the judicial centre for Douglas until 1857, when it transferred to the much larger former 'Oddfellows Hall' in Athol Street. The Imperial Hotel was then built on the site of the Red Pier courthouse in 1860.

The 'Meeting Rooms and Concert Hall' was commissioned by the Independent Order of Oddfellows in 1840 to play host to the British 'Annual Moveable Conference' of their order in 1841. Designed by John Robinson of Douglas, and built by his brother Henry Robinson, the Hall was, in its time, said to be the largest room in the island - capable of accommodating 400 persons at dinner with another 150 seated in the gallery above. Unfortunately this grand hall had overstretched the Oddfellows' finances so it was soon sold. After a short period as the Prince of Wales Theatre



Ramsey courthouse, designed by George Steuart

and then as St George's Hall, the hall was acquired by the Insular Government in 1857 for use as a court house, by the Rolls Office, and as a police station.

Whilst Robinsons' grand façade remained relatively intact, the interior was gradually modified for the Court and other offices uses, then to accommodate the Police Station with its remand cells. Until the 1970s juvenile offenders were imprisoned on the top floor of the courthouse and were looked after by a warden and his wife.

The Athol Street courthouse also played an important civic role, acting as the chamber for Tynwald from 1866 (when they moved from Castletown to Douglas) until 1894 when they transferred to

an chamber added to another Robinsons' building, the former Bank of Mona - now the Legislative ('wedding cake') building.

The Athol Street premises finally ceased to be a court-time courts were usually held in the old Grammar School behind Lough House. In 1797 Deemster Crellin wrote to

RAMSEY

In 1794, Mr John Frissell Crellin, the first High Bailiff of Ramsey, was elevated to Northern Deemster, at which time courts were usually held in the old Grammar School behind Lough House. In 1797 Deemster Crellin wrote to

his master, the Duke of Athol, pleading for the erection of a Court house 'for the decent and commodious administration of Justice I am pent up in a school room from 10 in the morning until 5 or 6 in the evening with from 2 to 300 people'.

The Duke admitted the need and commissioned George Steuart to design a new courthouse for Ramsey; the Duke agreed to purchase the land (£150) but the cost of construction (£2,345) had to be raised from Ramsey and the northern parishes. Built in 1800, Steuart's design follows that of his original Douglas 'Red Pier' courthouse.

From the start, possibly to encourage the local populace to help fund it, it was designed for flexible commu-



Lavish civic-pride decoration on Peel Courthouse

nity use so the public could be entertained both by spectating whilst it was in use as a court, and - courtesy of easily removed fittings - it could be used for functions as diverse as lectures on astronomy to fancy dress balls. In 1832, it was described as:

'Its courthouse elegant, all strangers see,

Who may hear causes, without cost or fee,

And where on ball nights they may dance with glee.'

The court was improved in 1837, probably by Thomas Brine; and later, as elsewhere, the courtroom played host to the police station as well. The last court was held in 1997, the Police moved to the town hall in 2011, and the Post Office's short stay ended in 2016; so now-----?

VARIED LIVES

As can be seen, the life-story of our courthouses is long and varied.

The Athol Street premises illustrate the changing and sometimes cyclical life of a building. From concert hall and meeting rooms, then a theatre and church hall; to 140 years as a courthouse and civic facility; and now in the twenty-first century back to a place of entertainment - although High Bailiff Laughton's reminiscences indicate that some of the court proceedings had been entertaining too!

The story of our courthouses demonstrates that, even when Registered, a building needs to have sustainable use to guarantee a long life.