

BUILDINGS AT RISK

Heritage: At one time, the island had far more ropeworks than necessary for fleet, and their output was exported worldwide

Ties to the past, now cut

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Since time immemorial, man has tried to improve on the strength of the natural fibres he found around him, starting as a purely manual process, twisting or braiding a few leaves or stems together.

The first tools used were probably suitably shaped branches to help twist the material together, much in the fashion we still use a bucket handle to this day when making suggane (straw rope) on the island.

Early ropes were just one or a few bundles of fibres twisted together, but the result could be lumpy, inflexible and likely to unravel – if you were making a lanket for a ewe that might not matter, but the growth of the island as a centre for fishing and shipping drove rope production in the island, as elsewhere.

Ropeworks produced varying grades and sizes of cordage – from thin twine to hawsers as thick as your wrist – which were judged by their strength, flexibility, uniformity, durability, and cost/value.

The key to strength, uniformity and flexibility is, rather than making it all at once in one bundle, is to start with fine fibres which are spun into yarn, which are then sequentially assembled or formed into bigger cordage, ropes and hawsers; and alternating the direction of twisting as the strands are combined can reduce the propensity for the rope to un-twist itself.

Spinning the carded fibres into yarn was the first task really mechanised – and some of this could be done indoors.

Laying-up the strands of yarn into cordage required keeping them all at the same tension with minimum twist, which was done by anchoring them at one end and then working 'backwards' along a straight path known as a ropewalk – which needed to be as long as the longest rope or hawser to be made. At first this was done outdoors, but then some of the bigger ropeworks roofed-over their ropewalks (as at Quiggins' on the Lake in Douglas, close to today's Tesco).

This laying-up was a sequential process – lay three spun-yarns into one, put aside, make up another two separate



Charlie Corkill hand-laying rope at a Ropewalk in Ramsey

(Manx Museum)

three-ply yarns, then lay those three together, etc. At first done by hand, later mechanisation allowed concurrent spinning.

Much cordage was left untreated, but for longevity some would be coated or infused with pine tar (resin distilled from pine, often as result of making charcoal) – the best being 'Stockholm Tar', although 'Archangel Tar' was often used for ropework (the tar sometimes being brought back as return cargo from trips across the 'German ocean' with herring).

Thin twine could be tarred and used for pots and creels; whereas mooring ropes, hal-yards and sheets were often left untreated for flexibility; but standing rigging such as shrouds would often be tarred in situ as well.

MANX ROPEWORKS

Whilst the fishing fleet, especially the net-makers, consumed much of their output,



Mechanisation at Quiggins' Ropeworks, Douglas (Manx Museum)

the island had far more ropeworks than would be necessary just for a domestic fleet, and their output was exported worldwide – indeed as far as South America!

Commercial ropeworks operated in the island from at least the late 18th century to the 20th century; and while there were a few quayside ropeworks (and some smaller operators had premises in town), others found sites out-

of-town which afforded scope for longer uninterrupted ropewalks.

While most of these 20 or more ropeworks and ropewalks have been lost, traces can occasionally still be seen.

The last two standing were Quiggins' in Douglas, and at Peel works where, as described opposite, the chance was taken to systematically record the remaining core premises prior to demolition



Composite rope drawing machine at Quiggins'

in 2004 (albeit many years after they were used for making rope).

Readers may also remember the roofed ropewalk at Quiggins' which survived until relatively recently, with partitions inserted to make a number of storehouses, the back wall forming the boundary with the railway station.

At Castletown, traces can still be seen where Alexandra Road was taken over the rope-

walk which ran from Qualtrough's yard through to the Golden Meadow mill.

In Ramsey, all trace has been lost of the ropewalks on the Quay, in the area of Beaconsfield at the end of Jurby Road, and at Milntown; as have all traces of the Port St Mary ropewalk.

The moral is that when buildings do have to be lost, they must be thoroughly recorded.



Peel Ropeworks – recording in progress by Peel Heritage Trust before it is demolished

(Culture Vannin)

Importance of recording past

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Even the most passionate conservationist has to accept that buildings cannot last forever.

However, the 'heritage' people do get hot under the collar when buildings are demolished for no reason, and without any consideration as to other uses – especially if they're not recorded before demolition.

The Peel area has its share of buildings which have been put to other uses: the Sailors' Shelter, the Centenary Centre, the railway station, the Masonic Hall, the Philip Christian Centre, the Transport Heritage Museum and the Leece Museum to name but a few.

Peel Ropeworks is no longer standing, but it too has had an interesting past.

The works and the ropewalk are marked on the 1869 Ordnance Survey map.

The Lord's Mill, marked as a flour mill, was water-powered, and is now used by the Horizon Scaffolding company.

Henry Graves' sawmill is also marked, next to the gas

works. The Graves family business included the ropeworks.

In the 1800s, Peel had all the necessary trades to serve the fishing and boat-building industries: timber yards, sail lofts, ships' chandlers and a ropeworks were all in place.

Every ropeworks had to have a long, straight ropewalk and even that is shown on the 1869 map.

Obviously there was little if any mechanisation during the twisting operation, just muscle power, provided by men desperate for land-based work to provide for their families.

When cheaper, mass-produced rope became available, the Peel operation was closed.

A passage from Fred Palmer's book *Glimpses of Old Peel* states that 23 people were employed in Henry Graves' ropeworks: 'The Rope Walk – up past the power station was the area where the rope factory was situated. It was run by the Graves family, who were also into ship building, and employed 23 people at rope making.'

'With the development of multiple sail rigging between 1830-1840, there was a need for ropes to rig them. There they constructed a ropewalk almost

1,000 feet long.

'The spinning was done by hand, but the ropes themselves were made by machinery. The width of the ropes varied from one inch to 6 inches. (NB The width of the ropes was actually the circumference, and not the diameter).

'The heavy ropes were used for mooring, the thinnest for the top and bottom of fishing nets. The lengths made ranged from 35 fathoms for the small ropes to 120 fathoms for the large ones. (NB: A fathom is 6 feet). The bulk of the heavier ropes were exported. Their quality is reflected in the International Fishery Exhibition, held in London in 1883.

'The Graves rope gained a diploma for their one-inch rope which was used for Dandy rigging, as well as the nets.

'With the decline of the fishing in the 1890s, the factory was sold to the Gourock Rope-work Co. Ltd. and eventually closed down.'

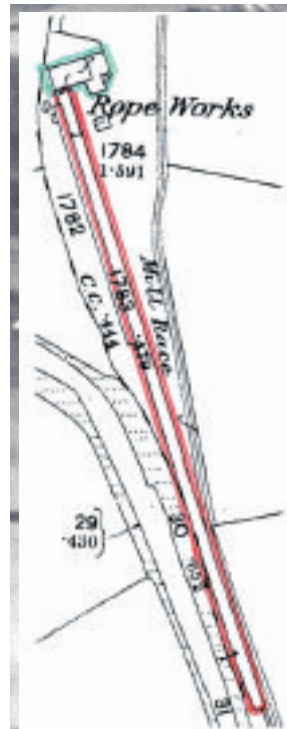
The then redundant building was subsequently used for the most unlikely of purposes: a holiday camp!

A man in the know of 'Campbell's Camp' was the late Fred Radcliffe who many years ago told of his time there during the Second World War.

The photograph, taken from Peel Hill, shows the whitewashed building with a long wooden sign which read: Close Chiarn Camp.

Apparently, there were various grades or classes of guest accommodation. The deluxe category was upstairs with the basics inside wooden cubicles. The cheapest category was space in a bell tent in the adjoining field.

Ruby Garrett was a Scottish 'fish girl' who came, with others, from Peterhead in the



Peel Ropeworks building in a picture taken from Peel Hill. Inset, a first edition Ordnance Survey showing Peel Ropeworks (green) and Ropewalk (red)



Recording in progress inside Peel Ropeworks

(Sam Knight)

summer to gut fish all day for little pay.

Accommodation for the girls was in wooden huts, grandly called chalets, which were in a line where the garages are now.

There must have been washing facilities inside the main building, because Ruby was told that when there were 'campers' in residence in the 'big house', the fish girls had to manage with an even more basic washing area in the yard outside.

Worse still, they had to take a bucket to get water from the head race for the flour mill.

In the early 1940s Merseysiders stayed in the camp,

no doubt as a quiet and safe respite from the bombing in Liverpool. It must have been so peaceful there, with no buildings anywhere near, children could play in the fields and by the River Neb, the peace broken only by the steam trains passing from time to time.