

## BUILDINGS AT RISK

# Irish soil shipped over to create foundations for mansion house

*In this week's Buildings at Risk article, Simon Artymiuk looks at the rise and fall of the original Fort Anne - a Georgian seaside mansion housing a succession of famous residents before eventually becoming a hotel. He also looks at how, after that building sadly fell into ruin and was demolished, there arose the new Fort Anne we see today: a remarkable state-of-the-art office building paying tribute to the past by recreating the look of the original*

**F**ort Anne is often associated with RNLI founder Sir William Hillary, but its story really begins with an inveterate Irish gambler who blew a huge fortune he had inherited.

Thomas 'Buck' Whaley was born in Dublin in 1766, son of a landowner, magistrate and former Member of the Irish House of Commons who died in 1769, leaving the toddler a Dublin townhouse, extensive lands in County Wicklow generating a lump sum of £60,000 (today around £4.2m), all of which he would inherit when he reached 18.

Before that, at 16, Thomas was sent on the Grand Tour of Europe and managed to lose £14,000 in Paris in a single night of gambling.

He became a member of the Irish House of Commons in 1785 but three years later took up a bet that he couldn't travel to Jerusalem and back within two years. The Holy Land was then under Turkish Muslim control, with a reputation for ruthless banditry, but he managed to charm a succession of fearsome Ottoman rulers and reach Jerusalem.

He returned to Dublin in triumph in the summer of 1789, having taken only a year to complete the challenge. Despite his £8,000 travel costs he still had £7,000 profit from his winnings.

In the mid-1790s mounting debts forced him to sell his Irish estates and move to the Isle of Man, then a place where a gentleman could remain safe from creditors. Accompanying him was a Miss Maria Courtney, who bore him four children and - in the Isle of Man at least - was known as 'Mrs Whaley'. A portrait of her from Fort Anne is now in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.

It was Thomas and Maria who had the crenellated mansion built on Douglas Head. Either because of a bet or because of an inheritance, they had to continue living on Irish soil - so they had a schooner-load shipped over to spread over the foundations and surrounding land.

Fort Anne was described by a contemporary as 'an exceedingly handsome seat, having been built at great



Fort Anne in Douglas, pictured in 1974



The Fort Anne site is cleared before being rebuilt in 1997



The rebuilding project in progress, 1997

expense...in an elevated situation... and commands a most delightful prospect'. The writer added that from the town pier it looked like some ancient ruins which had been recently modernised. To the Manx, however, it was 'Whaley's folly'.

Maria died young in around 1797 and then an improvement in Thomas Whaley's finances saw him returning to Dublin - just as the 1798 Irish Rebellion broke out.

In 1799 Whaley married Mary Lawless, sister of his friend Valentine Lawless, 2nd Baron Cloncurry. This sounds like an advantageous match but Valentine had actually been arrested for supporting the Irish Rebellion and was held in the Tower of London until 1801. In 1800 Thomas Whaley died, aged just 33, at Knutsford in Cheshire while

travelling from Liverpool to London. The official cause was 'rheumatic fever' but the story in Ireland was he had been stabbed in a fit of jealousy by one of two sisters, both of whom he had been courting. His wife Mary is noted some time later as living in half of Fort Anne as 'the proprietor' while a Major Ormsby and his family lived in the other half.

### SIR WILLIAM HILLARY

Some sources state that Sir William Hillary lived in Fort Anne when he first came to live in the Isle of Man in 1808. If so, he must have been renting all or part of it from Mrs Whaley.

A Yorkshire Quaker born in Wensleydale in 1771, he also came to the Isle of Man because he had got into debt.

In 1797 he had visited Rome and became equerry to another son of King George III,

Prince Augustus, who had been sent to the Continent due to his asthma. The prince had recently provoked a scandal by marrying a relative of the Duke of Atholl, Lady Augusta Murray, without the King's permission.

Augusta was daughter the Earl of Dunmore, who had been royal governor of Virginia at the time the American War of Independence. The prince was only 21 while Augusta was nearly 30, but they married first at a hotel in Rome and then, when Augustus was ordered home, again at a London church - with the prince disguised as a shopkeeper.

In 1794 the furious King had the marriage annulled. This provoked an article in the Gentleman's Magazine in which the Isle of Man was mentioned: 'Her fortune is certainly slender; but...there

is no Prince in Europe who could say that a match with Lady Augusta would disgrace his rank... for her ancestor [was] the Countess of Derby... whose daughter, Lady Amelia-Sophia-Stanley carried the sovereignty of the Isle of Man into the Murray family...'

Prince Augustus was sent back to Italy and Augusta was banned from visiting him. William Hillary moved with the prince to Naples and was sent by him on an open boat expedition to Malta and Sicily to help warn of the growing threat of French invasion. His visit to Malta led to him developing a life-long interest in the Order of the Knights of St John.

When Napoleon threatened Naples, William and Prince Augustus moved to Berlin - where Lady Augusta joined them after hearing the prince was ill. In 1799



Thomas 'Buck' Whaley



Sir William Hillary with Maltese Cross



Prince Augustus Frederick, Duke of Sussex, in a portrait by Guy Head

Hillary returned to England following a love interest of his own: Frances Elizabeth Disney Fitch. They married in 1800 and Hillary went to live in her ancestral home in Essex. Prince Augustus was godfather to one of their twin children, named Augustus in his honour.

In 1803 Hillary raised a military troop to defend the Essex coast against French invasion, using his wife's money to do so, and was made a baronet. However, he also got into serious debt by borrowing heavily, resulting in marriage break-up and William's move to the Isle of Man. Frances eventually divorced him in 1813 and William soon after married a Manx woman, Emma Tobin of Middle Farm, in Scotland.

It is said that Hillary always held the ambition of owning Fort Anne but when



The frontage of the rebuilt Fort Anne, pictured last week



The original Fort Anne, year unknown, during its time as a hotel



The rebuilt harbour frontage of the Fort Anne building which faithfully replicates the original. Below, the detailed circular frieze in the atrium

he undertook his famous rescues of shipwrecked crew and passengers who came to grief on the Conister Rock in 1822 and 1830 and founded the RNLI in 1824 he was actually living in a house in Prospect Hill.

In the meantime, in 1823, Fort Anne was bought by a member of the Milntown Christians family. John Christian, born in Castletown in 1776, was the son of only MHK and MP John Christian Curwen and his first wife, Margaret Taubman, who died when he was two.

Educated at Eton, Cambridge University and London's Inns of Court, young John became a Justice of the Peace for Somerset, where he married Miss Susannah Allen of Bath in 1807. However, in 1823 the Duke of Atholl, as Governor of the Isle of Man, asked him to return to become First Deemster. John, Susannah and their six children duly arrived and made their home in Fort Anne.

In 1829 William Hillary's son Augustus, who had joined the 6th Dragoon Guards, married John Christian's eldest daughter, Susan Curwen Christian. In the same year John Christian inherited Milntown, decided to rebuild it and put Fort Anne up for sale. So Sir William Hillary was at last able to buy the house in 1831 and, the following year, from its windows watch his Tower of Refuge taking shape. He apparently paid an exorbitant price for the mansion, having to put down £600 and then take a mortgage of £900 with an interest rate of five per cent, but he embarked on a programme of improvements, including plans for a picture gallery.

He had a small cannon mounted on a battery which was fired to welcome the arrival of the mailboat and this remained with the house when it became a hotel after Sir William Hillary's death in 1847. In later years it was fired at noon to mark the opening of the hotel's Ocean Restaurant.

**INTO THE 20TH CENTURY**

Fast forward to the 1920s and an advert for the 'Fort Anne Hotel Douglas and Golf Links' states: 'This magnificent Hotel stands in its own Grounds and occupies what is allowed to be the finest situation on the Island. Although situated at the front door of Douglas, it is sufficiently removed from the busy thoroughfare to ensure perfect quiet.

'Within Five Minutes of the Landing Pier. Unlimited Marine and Landscape Views. MOTOR GARAGE with Inspection Pit. Excellent Cuisine. Wines, Spirits &c, of the finest Vintage and Quality. SANITARY ARRANGEMENTS PERFECT.

'All charges moderate. Open all year round. Porters meet all Steamers'.

An additional attraction was the Fort Anne Golf Links 'immediately at the rear of the hotel' and 'laid out under the supervision of Mr Jack Morris of Hoylake'. As well as club members, it was 'open on Sundays to visitors staying at the hotel or at the Falcon Hotel'.

In 1922 a visitor's pass for the course cost 2s 6d a week, 15s a fortnight or £1 1s 0d a month. It seems to have survived the Second World War and was still open to golfers in 1947.

During the war years, from

around 1940, Douglas Head was the location for a stone frigate training establishment called HMS Valkyrie. It mainly provided advanced courses for radio/radar mechanics of both sexes. Their training also involved rowing exercises and the Fort Anne jetty was where they launched their boats.

After the war tourists initially returned in large numbers and in the 1950s, the Fort Anne Hotel was still regarded as a smart establishment, with an advertisement of that period stating it was the place to stay 'for a luxurious holiday overlooking Douglas Bay!'

The advert added: 'Open all year round. Fully licensed. Excellent cuisine. Expert management and service. Relax in comfort at this beautifully appointed hotel - telephone 503 and 565.'

A man who remembers the hotel well in those days is island tour guide manager and former president of the Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society Frank Cowin, who had his wedding breakfast there

in 1959. He remembers the magnificent fanlight over the front door to the hotel and that he and his wife had competition at their reception, as during the speeches gentlemen guests kept disappearing to a side bar - and it turned out the glamorous 'blonde bombshell' film actress Diana Dors was staying in the hotel and was seated in the side bar. At that time she was touring with her own theatre-based cabaret show and that year she married the comedian Richard 'Dickie' Dawson.

At that time the hotel was still privately owned, but in the late 1960s it was taken over by a hotel group, which had extensions added designed by film set designers at a time of a slump in the Irish movie locations industry. Like film sets these additions looked wonderful but turned out to lack proper substance.

Frank Cowin got to know the hotel from another angle when his job required him to rectify problems with the drains.

Nevertheless, many island residents remember the



building with affection. On the Manx Notebook website, Ian Morris, who worked as a trainee manager at the hotel in its last days in the early 1970s, remembers its faded grandeur and notes that the stained glass above the windows of the semi-circular Porter's Lodge entrance showed scenes of fishing boats against a sunset background. He adds: 'At night, with the Porter's Lodge lights on, they make a fine sight for entering guests... In the Sun Lounge... plate glass windows began two feet above the carpet and went virtually the full height of the room in a sweeping curve with views from Douglas Head - the lighthouse, Conister Rock, and the Tower of Refuge beyond.'

In his day the cannon stood on a large chest next to the reception desk.

Sadly the hotel closed in 1974 and rapidly fell into a ruinous state - some believe the new additions may have weakened the main structure.

Despite its historical value and interest, the building was demolished in 1979 - and remains missed by many who remember it.

**FAITHFUL REPLACEMENT**

With this in mind, when Dohle (IOM) Ltd, a division of a Hamburg-based shipping

services company, came to build new offices on the old Fort Anne site, they chose the celebrated Douglas architect Ian Brown, who was also responsible for rebuilding the Villa Marina. With the new Fort Anne, he consciously sought to give the building the crenellated look of the old hotel. Frank Cowin admires the new building as from viewpoints along the promenade you would hardly know that the new Fort Anne is a modern replacement.

The striking reception area, with its circular atrium and glass balconies, pays reference to the classical style of the old hotel's interior decor with a series of elegant moulded plaster friezes depicting historic ships through time.

Facilities include an indoor swimming pool and gym, plus three luxury residential apartments.

Dohle is a major island employer providing a full range of shipping contract, operation and insurance services. In view of Sir William Hillary's past association with the site, it is a coincidence that, just as he did, the company has connections with Germany, an emphasis on safety at sea and also links to Malta through a company division with some of its staff based at Fort Anne.



Diana Dors proved a distraction at a Fort Anne wedding function



Fort Anne was a prominent and popular hotel until the 1970s