

BUILDINGS AT RISK

Where there's a wheel there's a way ...

Groudle Glen, one of the Island's best known tourist attractions, doesn't have many buildings – but almost the whole glen has been shaped by the hand of man. Chris Callow, an undergraduate student of history & heritage at University College Isle of Man, describes the history of the glen and its buildings, and how both are at risk.

Groudle Glen today is a popular spot for walkers, who probably don't stop to ponder how such a well-wooded area came into being. It is down to one of the giants of the island's Victorian tourist industry, Richard Maltby Broadbent.

Born at Bibaloe Beg in Onchan in 1850, Broadbent became engaged in extensive property development in Douglas, notably constructing and operating the Pavilion on Harris Promenade, famously replaced by the Gaiety Theatre which has survived to this day, thanks to Government intervention in 1971.

So successful was Broadbent that in 1894 he commissioned Mackay Hugh Baillie Scott to design his home Ivydene at Little Switzerland, Douglas. Much information about the early family came to light recently when the current owner of Ivydene discovered in the loft and restored to RMB's great-grandsons the Broadbent family bible.

Broadbent worked closely with Frederick Sanderson, a civil engineer responsible for early property development in Ramsey, who was also closely associated with Baillie Scott. Sanderson was a prime mover in ambitious plans to develop the Howstrake Estate to the North of Douglas for housing with a new roadway and pioneer electric tramway being constructed from Derby Castle to Groudle.

At the same time as Sanderson was progressing his plans for the Howstrake Estate, Broadbent took a lease of the Groudle Valley, then largely unimproved marshy scrubland, and set about developing it as a tourist attraction, planting thousands of trees and creating rustic walks.

He allowed Sanderson to extend his new road and tramway down from Groudle Old Road to the site of his intended new Hotel high above the Groudle Stream. Although the plans have not survived it is accepted this building was also designed in his hallmark style by Baillie Scott; it was rapidly



Derelict waterwheel building (author)

constructed and licenced on July 4, 1893, the Glen opened on August 5 and the first trams ran to the Groudle terminus on September 7 in the same year.

The Groudle River powered a considerable number of mills in its journey from the heights of Onchan Parish to the sea. The lowest of these was Groudle mill, just above the shore where there is now a public carpark; the earliest record of a mill on this site was in the manorial roll of 1511-15. The mill-building of 1854 fell out of use later in the century but enjoyed a new lease of life as a pumping station for Douglas Waterworks from 1885, and it is believed was used in the 20th century as a commercial laundry before being demolished when the Groudle Holi-

day Village was constructed in the 1970s.

What most people now recognise as Groudle Mill is a rustic style wheelhouse complete with water-wheel, constructed by Broadbent in a narrow section of the Groudle Gorge just below the hotel building.

EYE FOR STYLE

Broadbent had great flair and an eye for style; the building fits perfectly the sylvan setting, but also served a purpose, as it housed a pump to send water up from the river to the newly constructed hotel. The water-wheel is reputed to have been taken from the Bowring Mill further up the Groudle River; there is a dubious apocryphal tale that the wheel was manhandled intact down the riverbed to its new home.

In keeping with the spirit of the times Broadbent constructed a small zoo in a cove to the North of Port Groudle; here an inlet was dammed to provide a home for sealions imported from California. Unfortunately, of the eleven purchased only six survived to complete the journey. There was also a bird house, brown bear cubs and two polar bears.

Encouraged by the number of visitors, Broadbent conceived the idea of a two-foot gauge steam railway running from the mid-point of the glen above the gorge of the tributary stream called Lhen Coan to the zoo. This was constructed in two years and opened in May 1896; the locomotive Sealion was built by Bagnalls of Stafford. The Groudle line was an immediate success



Richard Maltby Broadbent (Manx Museum)



Inclined railway on Douglas Head (Manx Museum)

and carried 10,000 passengers in its first two months of operation. In the early years, the Glen itself was attracting some 100,000 visitors per season and in 1905 a second locomotive Polar Bear was added to cope with demand.

Given that he played such a major part in creating the Glen, Broadbent features little in accounts after its opening. This may well be connected with the collapse of Dumbell's Bank in which it is believed he lost heavily, as did many of the figures involved in both Glen and tramway, the Douglas Bay Estate & Groudle Glen Limited and Isle of Man Tramways & Electric Power Co Limited both going into liquidation. Broadbent built for himself a lesser but still stylish house, Eskadale, which still stands at

the side of the tramway which by then had extended from Groudle to Laxey and eventually Ramsey, with a separate line from Laxey to the summit of Snaefell. His later life saw tragedy with the loss of three of his four sons in the Great War. His prodigious involvement in Manx tourism had not ended, however; he had been responsible for the construction of Douglas Head Incline Railway in 1900 and operated it at least until sale to a limited company in 1922.

World War One saw the Glen closed between 1915 and 1918, it is not clear what happened to the polar bears but the sealions survived. In the inter-war years an experiment was made with battery-powered locomotives but these soon wore out so the steam



Visitors watching Broadbent's sea-lions at Groudle (Manx Museum)



Proudly cared-for station buildings (Groudle Glen Railways)



Groudle Glen waterwheel and hotel above (Manx Museum)



Original Groudle Mill, painted by John Millar Nicholson in 1875 (Manx Museum)

engines were overhauled and brought back into service. Post World War II, falling income and ageing equipment lead to closure of the railway in 1967. The majority of the Glen was sold to Onchan Village Commissioners, the railways buildings were demolished, track lifted and both locomotives left the island. In 1974 the lower section of the Glen from Lhen Coan to the shore was sold by the Commissioners to a private developer who constructed the existing holiday village.

In 1982 the Isle of Man Steam Railway Supporters Association began planning to restore the railway.

Volunteers began the massive task of reinstating the trackbed, and the first section of track reopened in

1986. In 1987 the refurbished Sealion returned to the Island, and in 1992 the line reopened to the original Sealion Rocks terminus, where refreshment rooms have since been opened. The volunteer-run railway now runs each Sunday and some evenings in the summer-months, attracting many visitors to the Glen.

The wheelhouse is possibly one of the most photographed buildings on the island, and well-known to thousands of visitors and residents. It has long since ceased to carry out any work, although in the past the wheel was used to generate power for lighting in the Glen.

As with all Manx streams, the Groudle River is prone to spate in times of heavy rainfall and in recent years flooding has wreaked havoc to the

river banks requiring remedial major works to be carried out by the Forestry Amenity & Lands Division of the Department of Environment, Food & Agriculture.

DILAPIDATED

Regrettably the wheelhouse has not received the same level of care and it has been allowed to fall into a dilapidated state, to the extent that it has been deemed necessary to erect unsightly fencing preventing access from the adjacent path. It is unfortunate that this path is the principal access to the Lhen Coan terminus of the Groudle Glen Railway; the sad state of the wheelhouse is in marked contrast with the superbly maintained and presented railway station buildings.

It is not only the state of the wheelhouse that is cause for concern, but the condition of the Glen itself.

The footpath in the lower glen from the confluence of the Groudle River with Lhen Coan is in private ownership, and would benefit from repair to the riverbank.

The upper glen is believed to be rented by the Department from the Commissioners. Here an extremely attractive and popular footpath runs up to the Whitebridge on the main Douglas to Laxey Road, where the Rotary Club of Onchan have created a footway under the bridge allowing pedestrian access into Molly Quirk's Glen. The section of the glen immediately upstream from the tramway viaduct has suffered very badly

from fallen trees in the gales of recent years. It appears that the policy of the Department is to leave these trees where they fall, simply maintaining the paths and diverting them where necessary.

Recently large amounts of branches have been deposited in the river bed; this is both unsightly and likely to add to the damage that may be caused by heavy rainfall if not removed before the autumn.

There also appears to have been no attempt to replace fallen trees with saplings. As the glen was largely planted at one time many trees will end their natural life at the same time so it is important to carry out replanting where possible so our grandchildren and their children can continue to enjoy the glen in the same way

as we have been lucky enough to.

In response to public concern, Garff MHK Daphne Caine questioned Minister Boot concerning the glen at the Tynwald sitting on 16th May.

The Minister placed responsibility for the maintenance of the wheelhouse squarely at the door of the Commissioners; pressed by Mrs Caine and other colleagues as to concerns over fallen trees and the general condition of the glen, Mr Boot undertook to visit the glen in person.

It will be interesting to hear both the result of the Commissioners' debate over the future of the wheelhouse and the Minister's inspection of the glen.