

BUILDINGS AT RISK

Port Soderick: How fortunes of a beauty spot ebbed and flowed

Chris Callow, who is an undergraduate student of history and heritage at University College Isle of Man, describes to Simon Artymiuk how the varied tourist attractions at Port Soderick have – like the tide in the bay – risen and fallen again over the years.

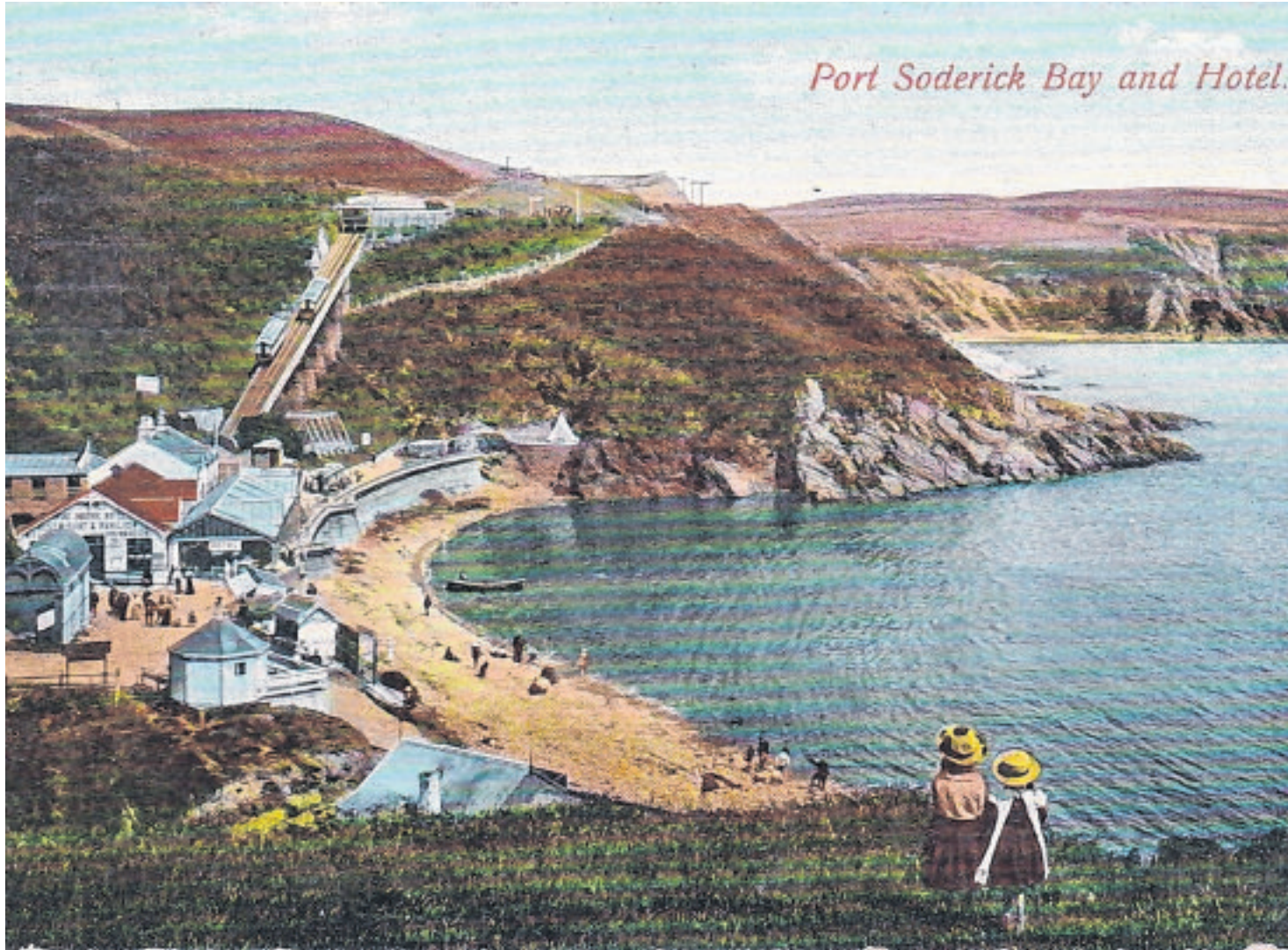
Port Soderick lies some four miles south of Douglas; an attractive cove with high cliffs at either end. It has a shingle beach where the Crogga Stream falls into the sea; this stream forms the boundary of the parishes of Braddan to the north and Santon to the south.

The origin of the name is Scandinavian; Kneen suggests 'south creek' or 'sunny creek', another suggestion hints at an early use, 'salt-shed creek'.

This article will deal with the development of the area as a tourist resort in the Victorian and Edwardian eras leaving many traces on the landscape still visible to the eye, but likely shortly to be swept away if the latest redevelopment scheme comes to fruition.

The first edition of the Ordnance Survey in 1866 shows a single dwelling on the shore accessed by a steep narrow road down from the old Castle-town Road. In 1853 one Joseph Ion 'late Sergeant of the Saint Helena Regiment' advertised that he had opened Port Soderick House as an inn to be called the St Helena Hotel 'where pic-nic parties can be accommodated with Tiffins of Curries, Devills, Pillaus &c. in the Oriental Fashion on the shortest Notice by an experienced Artiste'. It is tempting to link Ion's arrival on the island with the tenure of Sir Mark Wilks as Governor of St Helena, although his office there ceased in 1816 and he died in 1831. In any case it appears the exotic fare proved a little too adventurous for local tastes, as by January 1856 Ion's trustee was advertising for sale his household furniture and stock in trade which interestingly included a small fishing boat with lines, hooks and buoys.

Major development at Port Soderick was the work of two brothers Thomas and Morris Forrester. Thomas came to the island from Edinburgh in the 1880s to take up employment as a chef at the Castle Mona Hotel; his obituary in 1950 recorded that the two brothers were intimately connected with the tourism industry on the island all their lives, at different times operating



A colourful picture postcard view of Port Soderick in its heyday

the Glen Helen, Fort Anne & Queens Hotels. They were also associated with Laxey Glen Gardens and operated the Victoria Café on the Victoria Pier in Douglas.

In 1889 they purchased the Port Soderick Hotel and set about improving the facilities, adding a restaurant and concert hall, and the fine promenade marked with their names and the date of construction, 1897. Over the years the surrounding farms were added to the property portfolio and used to supply produce to the catering operation.

In the heyday of tourism there were three principal means of access to Port Sod-

erick – by railway, by tramway and by sea.

Port Soderick Station was the first halt on the southern line of the Isle of Man Railway, which opened in 1874. The railway company heavily advertised the station and developed a substantial traffic including excursion specials of as many as 20 carriages using 3 locomotives for the climb from Douglas. This traffic led to the simple station building being replaced in 1898 with the impressive station house that exists today. Originally it had a large refreshment room to cater for all the summer visitors using the stop but it is now a private dwelling. In the

station's heyday, passengers leaving the train would walk down the glen leading to the beach and all the attractions to be found there.

A more direct approach from Douglas was by the Douglas Southern Electric Tramway. The Marine Drive south from Douglas Head had originally been conceived as carriage way and walkway and construction had started in 1889.

The construction costs had overwhelmed the original undertaking but by 1893 the driveway had been pushed as far as Little Ness, at which stage the first mention was made of a tramway. This was

opened in 1896 as far as Kerristal with substantial steel bridges spanning clefts at Pigeon Stream, Horse Leap and Walberry, car-sheds at Little Ness and a generating station at Pigeon Stream.

Development of Port Soderick by the Forrester brothers led to an extension of the line to the clifftop above Port Soderick in 1897, and in the same year the Forresters installed a funicular lift linking the resort with the terminus of the tramway.

This twin-car funicular had previously linked the Fal-

con Cliff Hotel with Douglas Promenade. At the Douglas Head end of the tramway, passengers could travel by steam ferry across Douglas Harbour then take the Douglas Head Incline Railway to the start of the tramway. The track beds of both incline railways are still to be seen.

The Douglas Southern Electric Tramway was a very profitable operation carrying in excess of 200,000 passengers per season at its peak operation. Following temporary war-time closure between 1914 and 1918 it reopened with the return of visitors to the island in 1919, but became less viable in the 1930s and never



Port Soderick showing Camera Obscura and the funicular railway



A tram using the viaduct



The last Douglas Head tram in the Crich Tramway Village museum



A tram on Marine Drive



The Cathedral Gates on Marine Parade



A plaque marks the line's extension by Morris and Thomas Forrester

reopened after the Second World War. In 1951 car number 1 was removed for preservation and is now housed at the Crich Tramway Village museum attraction near Matlock, Derbyshire.

There is a long tradition of passenger vessels serving Port Soderick, starting with the Douglas & Port Soderick Steam Ship Company's Mermaid built 1888 and carrying 200 passengers.

Initially there was no jetty at Port Soderick and passengers had to be transferred into a small boat for landing on the beach.

Subsequently the Forrester family constructed the jetty and built up their own fleet of vessels including the original Karina of 1913. A regular pattern saw trippers being deposited at the jetty and the boat then spending time in the bay

for those wanting to fish, before calling at the jetty again to collect passengers for the return trip to Douglas.

At Port Soderick the Forresters utilised every inch of the ground to part the holiday-makers from their hard-earned cash.

The south side of the bay was advertised as oyster beds; oysters are not native to Manx waters but seed-oysters were imported from Strangford Lough in County Down, Ulster, each spring and laid in the oyster beds to be harvested through the season and sold at busy stalls.

Walk today around the largely destroyed concrete path below the southern cliffs, and you will still find oyster shells on the rocks.

Beyond this point a raised walkway led to caves romantically associated with smug-

glers; the cast-iron supports for this long-abandoned walkway can still be seen at low-tide. At the north end of the bay a similar raised walkway led round the foot of the cliffs through archways making the most of rock formations. Above the beach itself there was a camera obscura similar to that still in operation on Douglas Head as well as the restaurant, concert hall and playground.

The partnership between the Forrester brothers was dissolved in the 1920s with Thomas retaining control of Port Soderick.

He twice attempted to dispose of the property in 1936 and again in 1946, in each instance having to repurchase when the buyer ran into financial difficulties.

After the Second World War the property became in-

creasingly dilapidated until it was purchased in 1956 by Douglas Corporation, which carried out a major redevelopment scheme.

The Marine Drive had been reconstructed to form a roadway which was extended down to join the road from the railway station to the Port, and the Corporation ran motor buses from Douglas to Port Soderick along the roadway until 1975 when the cCorporation bus fleet was nationalised. The corporation ran an active advertising campaign in the Holiday News highlighting the singing waiters and waitresses at the Port Soderick Bar. In 1976 following a serious landslip the roadway on the Marine Drive closed to vehicles and the central section remains closed to this day.

The complex was sold by Douglas Corporation in

1985 and after a number of schemes came to nothing, a public house known as the Anchor operated between 1993 and 2002.

In the 1980s the former amusement arcade building at Southern end of the beach saw re-use for a boat-building project.

There is still a sea-link with Port Soderick today with the Laxey Towing Company operating trips from Douglas in their 100-seat Karina, purchased in Plymouth in 2000.

What remains for the visitor today? The coastal footpath still follows the steps down from the Marine Drive passing under the route of the former funicular railway and along the promenade, before

turning up the Glen which is now a Manx National Glen. Planning approval has recently been granted for the demolition of the buildings on the site and the construction of a boat house, a block of four houses and a detached dwelling.

The derelict walkway on the north side of the bay has already been demolished. It is heartening that a condition has been imposed on the approval requiring a public right of way along the promenade to be in place prior to any construction on site. The approval permits private residential and tourist accommodation; it is to be hoped that changing tourism trends will allow a viable use of Port Soderick that will see the site attractively developed consistent with continued public access.