

BUILDINGS AT RISK

As long-derelict structures at Port Soderick are demolished for the bay's redevelopment, Simon Artymiuk looks at how the

How hopes of restoring resort to its old glories can rise again

WHEN in spring 2016 Heritage Great Britain – owner of such UK attractions as The Needles in the Isle of Wight, Land's End in Cornwall and John o'Groats in Scotland – bought Port Soderick and said it wanted to 'bring the site back to life', hopes, as well as eyebrows, were raised.

Perhaps something resembling the old Victorian and Edwardian resort would emerge, or a revamp of the old cafe and restaurant enjoyed by holidaymakers in the 1960s and 70s?

However, within a year the site was sold on to the private company Ballacregga Estate Ltd, which has since submitted plans for a boat house and four private houses. The only public part of the scheme is permitted access to the beach and former promenade – and not the long-derelict elevated walkways enjoyed around the base of the cliffs by the Edwardian visitors. They once took the holidaymakers to imaginatively named and marketed caves, rock outcrops and bathing coves, but, more recently, have been the preserve only of determined anglers willing to risk slipping behind the barricades to reach vantage points on the rocks beyond. Now the pub and cafe building has been demolished, as have the walkways.

Similar elevated walkways in the cliffs also once existed at the end of the Groulle Glen Railway, to allow Victorian visitors to access the rocky coves housing its 'zoo attractions' of sealions, polar bears and brown bears – one element of the past that, of course, no-one would advocate bringing back today. However, old postcards show lines of visitors looking down at the animals from a high bridge across one of the cliff chasms and some rusting supports and steps can be seen around the revived glen railway's Sealion Rocks terminus.

Port St Mary still has a somewhat tamer elevated metal and concrete walkway curving around the shoreline to connect Chapel Bay beach and the Underway, but this can still be dramatic at high tide, with the waves surging beneath your feet and crash-



A coloured postcard shows a popular view from Port Soderick's Marine Parade

ing against the rocks of the shore. Not far away, some of the cliff paths between Port Erin and Bradda, and the wooden bridges across clefts in the cliffs, have latterly been fighting a losing battle with erosion. Their periodic closure deprives today's visitors of a feature which I, for one, very much enjoyed when on visits to the island as a youngster in the early 1980s.

I remember how enchanting it used to be to walk to Bradda Glen Cafe in the evenings along paths lined with fairy lights hanging from the trees, while dance music from within the building gradually drifted with the breeze into earshot. In those days you could buy an ice cream from the kiosk in the side of the cafe and then, feeling fortified, press on along the cliffs and up to Milner's Tower to enjoy the view of the sunset, the lights of Port Erin and maybe the glow from the distant County Down shoreline villages on the horizon. It is good to see the cafe building open again but the wooded paths giving access to it no longer have the atmosphere that they once did,



The Ballymena & Larne Railway ordered engines nearly identical to the Manx engine No.6 'Peveril'

probably because the loss of so many of the village's hotels has led to fewer evening visitors.

While the Isle of Man seems to be losing elements of its old tourism infrastructure, similar feelings of nostalgia to those I have described have led to the revival of long-closed cliff walkway and cavers path across the water in Northern Ireland.

The Gobbins footpath (a name derived from the same Gaelic word meaning 'bird's

beak' or 'headland' as Goby-Deigan – 'Devil's Point', between Peel and Kirk Michael, and Gob Lhiack – 'Point of the Slates or Flat Stones' – just south of Port Soderick) was the vision of the railway engineer Berkeley Deane Wise, who woke up to the tourism potential of cliff scenery when he was involved in building a new line around Bray Head, near Dublin, in the mid-1870s.

The original line around the towering cliffs between



Smugglers' Cave made a fine landmark for photographers



Port Soderick today

the seaside towns of Bray and Greystones had been surveyed by the famous English engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel and opened in 1855, but then erosion of the cliffs and rotting of Brunel's timber viaducts necessitated the construction of a new deviation route with new tunnels and cliff ledges. Today it is used by the frequent DART (Dublin Area Rapid Transit) commuter trains as well as mainline services heading between the capital and Wicklow, Wexford and Rosslare.

Wise found that the railway company had also opened a dramatic high cliff path which tourists, brought from the city by the railway at weekends, were willing to pay a fee to walk along and admire the views. This helped to fill carriages which would otherwise be lying idle waiting for the start of the working week and the stream of city commuters.

Wise put this lesson into practice in the 1880s when

he moved to Ulster and became engineer for the Belfast and Northern Counties Railway, building lines in County Antrim. The northern coast was already a famous tourist spot because of the extraordinary hexagonal basalt pillars of the Giant's Causeway, near Portrush, and from 1832-42 a new coast road, with tunnels, had been built to link that area and the previously isolated villages of the nine Glens of Antrim with the seaport of Larne on the east coast. With writers like William Makepeace Thackeray, of Vanity Fair novel fame, likening the scenery and waterfalls of Glenariff at Cushendun to 'a miniature Switzerland'. Wise saw a way that his railway company could cash in on tourism.

A number of smaller railway companies in the area had actually modelled themselves on the Isle of Man Railway, adopting the same narrow gauge of 3ft. One, the Ballymena & Larne Railway, even ordered engines nearly identical to the Manx engine No.6 'Peveril'. A connecting line called the Ballymena, Cushendun &

island's Victorian and Edwardian coastpath walkways parallels that of Northern Ireland which has undergone a revival

Red Bay Railway originally carried only iron ore down from mines in the mountains – but then it was taken over by Wise's broad gauge (5ft 3in) Belfast & Northern Counties Railway, which introduced passenger trains to a point where tourists could change to horse-drawn wagonettes taking them down steep-sided Glenariff to where the spectacular waterfalls were.

The railway company leased the land around the tumbling streams and then laid

out new paths and walkways through the wooded gorges, so the visitors could enjoy the scenery and then enjoy tea and refreshments at a cafe owned by the railway. It even had a darkroom so that enthusiasts of the new-fangled art of photography could develop their pictures. The tourists would then be picked up by the wagonettes and be taken along the Antrim Coast Road to Larne to join their train home or board a steamer across to Stranraer in Scotland. It was all very similar to how the Isle of Man glens were developed for rail-based tourism in around the same period.

It was the development of Larne harbour that led Wise to develop a new resort town at Whitehead, near the mouth of Belfast Lough. Wealthy members of the middle class were encouraged to build houses there with the offer of a year's free first-class rail pass for the first to do so. Sand was even shipped down from Portrush to create a new beach.

Wise then set about creating a new scenic cliff path running from Whitehead promenade to the dramatic viewpoint of Blackhead, which had views across the North Channel to the Mull of Kintyre and mountains of south-west Scotland. But it was on the peninsula known as Islandmagee, across the lough from Larne, that in 1902 he built an even more spectacular cliff path with iron bridges and elevated walkways that may well have inspired the ones which appeared at Port Soderick after around 1906.

The new Gobbins path hugged dramatic basalt cliff-faces, crossed steel footbridges over chasms into which the waves of the North Channel surged below, and went in and out of tunnels and caves cutting into the rock. It also used the steps of old smugglers' paths and guide books told visitors romantic tales about this aspect of the area's past (echoing the Smugglers Cave which was part of Port Soderick's attractions in the Isle of Man, as well as Dirk Hatterick's Cave at Garwick Glen beach, which was named after a Dutch-



Smugglers' Cave was a real attraction for visitors to the island



The impressive Tubular Bridge was made up of circular steel rings



The Gobbins path hugged dramatic basalt cliff-faces

Manx smuggler character in the novel *Guy Mannering* by Sir Walter Scott).

Tourists, having been brought from Whitehead railway station by wagonette, entered the Gobbins path through a hole in the rocks named 'Wise's Eye', where they paid a fee or showed an inclusive railway ticket. This entrance was only open from 10am to 5pm daily in summer and was sealed off with a gate at other times. Two footbridges then took the path across chasms to the small inlet of Sandy Cove, which, guarded by a sea stack, was an exciting place to have a picnic, with deck chairs provided and tea served from a hut nearby.

A real highlight was the unique Tubular Bridge, made up of circular steel rings holding up the narrow bridge deck and leading to an isolated sea-

stack called the Man O'War, because from some angles it resembled an old sailing ship (Port Soderick had its own iron bridge leading to a sea-stack called Dragon Rock which appears on old post-cards).

A section of the Gobbins path 30ft above the sea was called The Gallery, where the path had to be projected out from the sheer cliff-face on metal brackets. A stretch called The Aquarium allowed tourists to look down into a pool in the rocks, while The Tunnel was likened by some to a dark dungeon and Spleenwort Cave was popular with fern hunters, then something of a craze.

The path culminated in a suspension bridge dubbed The Swinging Bridge, because it was possible for mischievous youths to shake it

when tourists were crossing. The path ended suddenly at a steep drop called Gordon's Leap but there are indications that Wise planned to extend it for a further three miles.

Unfortunately his health declined before that could happen and then, thanks to new motor road competition and then the partition of Ireland, the finances of the railway company gave out. The Midland Railway of England, later the LMS Northern Counties Committee, took over and had less interest in maintaining tourist attractions.

In the Depression years there was no extra manpower to maintain the Gobbins path and, after it was closed during the Second World War, it quickly fell into disrepair, re-

opening only for a few years during the 1950s under the management of the new Ulster Transport Authority. However, it was still visited from time to time by adventurous types and those who remembered its thrilling scenery dreamt of it one day reopening, despite the difficult environment created by the Troubles from the 1970s onwards. In particular, the County Down photographer, film-maker, historian and lecturer John H Lennon worked hard to promote the idea of reviving the path, even undertaking surveys showing how the bridge structures could be recreated using modern methods. With the dawn of a more peaceful Northern Ireland after the Good Friday Agreement, the Army and Navy even offered to help. Although John H Lennon did not live to see his dream realised,

he did live long enough to hear that Larne Borough Council was embarking on a detailed project of restoration.

In 2011 the council put together a funding package comprising money from its ratepayers, a cross-border EU project helping schemes in Northern Ireland and neighbouring parts of Eire and western Scotland, and support from Ulster Garden Village Ltd charitable fund. The reinvented path, which some of bridges reconstructed, including the unique tubular bridge, reopened in 2014, as was a new visitor centre telling the story of how the path was built, outlining some of the stories and legends of the area.

While Edwardian visitors seem to have been

unfazed by the idea of tackling the Gobbins path in their best suits or long dresses and wearing broad-brimmed hats and boaters, today's visitors must pre-book for a guided tour on which they must wear hard hats and sensible footwear and which they are strictly warned not to embark on if they suffer from certain health conditions.

It is, if you like, a bit like a coastering expedition but without the need to jump from a height and get wet. This year access to the revived Gobbins path suffered a setback due to the activities of protected nesting birds but the attraction's well-designed website, www.thegobbinscliffpath.com, promises that it will be fully open again in spring.

Meanwhile, further up the Antrim Coast Road, the old railway company waterfall walkways inland from Cushendun are now promoted as part of the Glenariff Forest Park, with a variety of trails allowing visitors to appreciate the gorge and mountain scenery.

The old narrow gauge railways of Antrim are long gone, though – most closed in the 1930s, so with its still operational Victorian and Edwardian trains the Isle of Man can certainly show Ulster folk a thing or two there. The Gobbins is a stunning example of how a restoration can be achieved when individuals and organisations pull together with a common purpose.

As the Isle of Man looks once again at promoting itself for tourism, it would do well to advertise more widely the spectacular scenery to be enjoyed from its coastal paths and maybe consider upgrading those parts of the Raad ny Foillan which have suffered from the passage of time to make them more accessible to all.