

## BUILDINGS AT RISK

Heritage: The historic horse tram stables in Douglas are a unique survivor but they now risk demolition despite repeated calls to

# Selling family silver: Douglas Bay Summerhill Horse Tram Stables

Sunday, November 5, saw the final cavalcade, wash down and “de-shoeing” of The Trammers at Summerhill Stables, Douglas. On Monday, November 6, the horses left the stables. Is this for the last time ever?

Just how many in authority, whether by election or employment, know where the Douglas Bay Summerhill Horse tram stables are? Even the Isle of Man Examiner of October 24, 2017, included a letter about the stables with an image of Strathallan tram car sheds!

Following their decision, without warning, in January 2016 to dump the running of the horse trams, the world-wide unique status of the urban tramway stables as being still in use for their original purpose were put at risk by the decision of Douglas Borough Council, in August last year, to put the stables up for sale on the open market.

### POTENTIAL

They were advertised as a ‘unique development opportunity in prominent location on Queens Promenade in Douglas. Picturesque views [no mention of storms and smells] over Douglas Bay. Potential for redevelopment for a variety of uses, subject to planning. Site area 0.4 acres approx. Frontage 120 ft approx and depth 145 ft approx.’ View of a rockface at the rear – four-footed occupants of the latter might not complain, but two-footed might!

Fortuitously, the Department of Infrastructure was able to incorporate running of the horse trams within its existing programme. Not so the stables. Valued by government at well below the Council’s asking price, the Department of Infrastructure was unable to offer more for the stables along with Tramway Terrace, the row of three houses which front the older, or lower, part of the stables. Having demolished their rear outlets, the Council had deliberately allowed the inside of the Tramway Terrace houses to deteriorate, so that for many years they have been rendered uninhabitable. For sale purposes, while the Queen’s Promenade frontage has been painted, the windows have been “blacked off”.



Final preparations for leaving the stables under way



Keerah plating William’s mane for the end of season cavalcade



End-of-season deshoeing in progress



The frontage of Tramway Terrace

But go through an arch and a different world is entered.

A secure, cobbled yard – a ready-made film set in itself – is surrounded by a stable block dating from George Jones’s business of letter carrier before the takeover for the opening of the tramway in 1876. The oldest building has acted as an exhibit for the original layout of the stables which only allowed horses to be stalled head in. As described by Giovanelli, a friend of Mona Douglas, it was only during the Second World War that its use changed – to a “prison” for holding some perhaps

**‘During the Second World War its use changed – to a “prison” for holding some perhaps “not so quiet” internees’**

“not so quiet” internees from the neighbouring Metropole Camp. In recent years its traditional hayloft above has been the appropriately, temperature controlled harness room. At right angles to it is tramway founder Thomas Lightfoot’s purpose-built, three-storey, 1877 tramway stables building, part-altered internally to provide modern accommodation for some of the ‘trammers’ (as the tramway horses are known) to feed, turn around, lie down at will and sleep. The smallest and oldest trammer, “Mark”, might even oblige and turn the light switch off!

Above are the original first

and second-floor fodder storage areas and the hoist which was originally gas powered – until it went on fire, and the then horse-drawn Douglas fire brigade came to the rescue, albeit tramway staff had already by then rescued the horses and put out the fire! Replacement machinery all remains in place.

Lightfoot’s unique design incorporated a clerestory roof which, with its glazing, enabled a substantial amount of light and ventilation to enter the stalls below as well as access the hay loft to allow hay to be dropped down direct to the stalls below. The roof design was mirrored in later Manx

Electric Railway sheds and its trams; most of the former have disappeared.

A more complete working example of urban, artisan architecture, coupled with industrial architecture, it would be hard to find. And there is more: following the Dumbell Bank crash, Douglas Corporation bought and extended it. Formerly stabling 45 horses but rearranged in 2000 to provide larger stalls for the most of today’s 21 trammers, the upper stables were added.

Beyond, backing onto the former quarry rock face, is the working smithy signalled by the smoke rising from its 1930s hearth. Surrounded by size nines to size 13s, grinding stone and bellows which have been in regular use by the in-

house farrier. Here the trammers undergo their two-hour “pedicure” of clean/trim, prepare and shoeing before the season, regular re-shoeing during it, and are de-shod after the season ends.

The whole tramway operation, including its buildings, is of world-wide heritage value. The Island’s horse tramway is the envy of other tram systems throughout the world; apart from possibly the revived Victor Harbour Horse Drawn Tram operation in South Australia, none match in original purpose or date those on the Isle of Man – but the Aussie horses live outside all year; they have no stables. Even DOI Minister Ray Harmer stated to Tynwald in July 2016 ‘The stables are in good condition.’

have them registered



Visitors on one of the final stable tours, with horse Mark nosing in at right



A vignette of a tram on the first day of operations, with the Lightfoots on its upper level



The family of Sheffield engineer Thomas Lightfoot, who founded the Douglas Bay Horse Tramway in 1876



Looking up at the stables' clerestory roof



Inside the oldest part of the stables

# Tough task for island

So how do we try to protect the unique heritage the island has in such a site? Request DEFA Planning and Conservation to Register it, of course. Response – ‘do a report on its architecture and history and we will consider it’. Over the past year The Building Conservation Forum, which involves politicians, planners, the conservation officer, Manx National Heritage and outside organisations, voluntarily did just that. The full final report was submitted on July 3, 2017. Four months later, response – acknowledgement; action – none.

In the middle of July, in dismissing a petition to Tynwald to have a select committee formed to inquire into registration and conservation matters, Tynwald gave DEFA a mandate for action ‘to better protect protect and cherish our heritage whilst at the same time providing a more flexible environment that supports economic development.

Further requests to register the stables and/or serve a building preservation notice on them have been variously submitted to the Minister DEFA, chief executive DEFA, director of planning DEFA, conservation officer DEFA and planning committee secretary DEFA by Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society, the newly-named Alliance for Building Conservation group of heritage organisations working on the Buildings at Risk project, the island’s Victorian Society and at least one individual. Requests for a meeting were made. An offer to arrange to show the conservation officer around the stables was made. Response – nothing beyond an acknowledgement, if that, has even been received.

Tynwald did not simultaneously give the department a mandate to forget about its duties to enter buildings on the Register of Buildings of Architectural or Historic Interest or simply file reports on buildings that they had knowingly realised were at risk in a pending tray. It did not knowingly give anyone a mandate to treat volunteers, the third sector on which government wants to rely, and their reports with contempt. The background to

the current planning application 17/01067/B seems to be an indictment on the short-sightedness of the powers that be to appreciate the value of heritage. Douglas Borough Council seemingly declined to lease the stables to government for a further year.

The lack of action, combined with the determination to keep the conservation officer only as part time in this role while he serves the rest of the time in the Department of Economic Development, fuels fears that the government, like Douglas Borough Council, will bend over backwards to sell its heritage up in smoke to get some money in the coffers.

The island is happy to embrace being an associate to the ‘Convention of European Architectural Heritage 1988’ and indulge in being the first nation in 2017 to acquire ‘Biosphere Reserve Status’. Both designations include built as well as natural heritage. But do the island’s elected or employed members care? What are their priorities?

Perhaps now, more than ever, it could be important that they do actually prioritise, believe and show their belief in the concept of heritage having serious tourist potential and an honest way of bringing income and recognition to an island of superb attractiveness, including to a possibly significant element of non-residents and businesses.

Or should the island follow the example of Liverpool Docks World Heritage site and be named and shamed with the threat of loss of such status due to inappropriate development and lack of compliance with procedure under these designations?

In Summerhill Stables, 140 years of sustainable heritage has seemingly been brought to a close. Freedom to Flourish! was surely not adopted so that the island should lose all its heritage, individual identity and world-wide uniqueness; but the family silver has been sold.

A full article on the stables appeared in The Examiner on September 13 2016. See www.manxantiquarians.com and www.abc.org.im

**‘But do the island’s elected or employed members care?’**