

BUILDINGS AT RISK

Smiths and smithies: the warm heart of island communities

In this latest contribution to the Buildings at Risk series of articles in the Isle of Man Examiner, Sarah L. Christian of Ballaugh Heritage Trust takes a look at the important role that smithies played in the life of the island. She wishes to dedicate the article to the memory of Roy Kennaugh of Michael Heritage Trust, who always took an interest in such buildings and who sadly died last month.

According to the MNH Folk Life Survey, there were between 50 and 70 smithies at one time just in the north of the Isle of Man.

Of course, in the days before mass production, these craftsmen were essential within communities, but now they are gone, what trace is there of them in our built environment, and should their buildings be preserved as part of our villages' character?

A little delving into Manx social history informs us of just how important the smithy was to the people of the surrounding area.

The smithy was always a cosy place on a wet day and was where the men of the village would congregate for a warm-up and gossip.

Young men would also gather in the evenings to discuss the news – and sometimes arguments would break out and blows would be exchanged.

Bills notifying people of events and other news would also be posted on the walls outside – both chapel and inn – the smithy being a hub for farmers.

It is hardly surprising, then, that one of our last native speakers of Manx was John Kneen 'The Gaaue', with gaaue being Manx for smith.

John was in constant contact with Gaelic-speaking farmers.

He was born in Andreas and lived most of his life in Jurby East.

John was at least the third generation of his family to be a smith.

His father, also John, also provided a service as 'letter-writer' for those living nearby.

'The Gaaue' retired to the Ballaugh Curragh aged 84 and had a lifetime of stories to share.

STATUS

This he did by contributing to the preservation of Gaelic in recordings made by Yn Cheshaght Ghaelgagh and in contributing to the Folk Life Survey collected by the Manx Museum.

Even in towns, smiths had social status.

WJ or Willie Corkhill of Douglas became Mayor in 1930.

He was from Baldwin orig-



The interior of Willie Corkill's Blacksmith shop. Smiths were 'real men' and were well connected in the community. Mr Corkill became mayor of Douglas (Picture courtesy of MNH)

inally but became well-connected through membership of societies such as The Odd-fellows and Freemasons, and also through his role on the Douglas Board of Guardians.

He was responsible for bringing the conference of the British Master Farriers and Blacksmith Association to Douglas in 1927.

A story recounted in 1950 by David Craine MA tells of there being a shortage of blacksmiths in Braddan.

'REAL MEN'

A smith was serving three parishes at the time he was sentenced to be hanged and the people petitioned for a reprieve as they 'preferred to have a rogue rather than a dead smith'.

Smiths worked long hours, often from 7am to 9pm, and were regarded as 'real men'.

The busiest time of the year was autumn and getting implements ready for the farms.

In quieter times the smiths would make stocks of horse-shoes, as everything stopped when a horse was presented for shoeing, which was a matter of urgency.

The blacksmiths also made hoops for cart wheels, as well as gates, stools, chains, fenders and pokers, and did lots of mending.

Nails were usually made separately by nailors, who made little else.

Iron was brought across from Whitehaven in Cumberland and the smiths' fuel was usually imported coal,

although wheel hoops were made by the roadside on peat fires.

Farmers usually used the nearest smith (unless they had fallen out with him), but there are reports of competitive price-cutting in tough times.

The apprentices taken on by blacksmiths received no pay for years and often lived in outhouses and attics.

Some men who didn't keep an apprentice and were too mean to pay for help would allow their wives to work in the smithy at the sledge.

Most smithies were roofed in slate, although there were a few thatched ones.

Building materials were usually stone in the south, and brick or beach stone in the north.

Most of the northern smithies have gone, and so has the stone house to which 'The Gaaue' retired in the Ballaugh Curragh, where he died in 1958, aged 105.

What trace can we now see of the life of this important figure in island rural life?

Ballaugh Smithy at the Cronk is easily recognisable as such and I would argue that it is important that such buildings are kept in such a way as to reflect the past.

Of course, old buildings must be repurposed to ensure they are maintained and loved.

This then adds character to

our built environment.

Similarly, in Andreas we know by name 'The Old Smithy' and, in addition to the hint provided by some decorative horseshoes, it still looks like what it was and helps to add to the variety and charm of the village architecture.

The island is about to lose a working smithy in Douglas with the transfer and closure of the historic Horse Tram Stables on the Promenade.

However, if you would like to buy a former smithy there are a few on the market at the moment – at Sulby, Andreas and Baldrine.

Old Sulby Smithy features in Juan Vernon's book on the area.

He describes how, before The Mill Race development



Undated image of a busy working day with a wheel ready for hooping. Smiths preferred to shoe horses indoors as it made them easier to control. Horse shoeing was prioritised over other work (Picture courtesy of MNH)



Percy Brooke from Montpelier, Druidale, showing off one of the first motor vehicles in the island. Motorisation would lead to the decline of the horse for transport and ultimately the demise of the farrier/blacksmith (Picture courtesy of MNH)



The Smithy at Ballaugh Cronk in 1937, with everything looking nice and tidy (Picture courtesy of MNH)



Andreas old smithy in 2017. There is a horseshoe above the house name



Ballaugh Cronk Smithy in 2017. It is still very recognisable as the original Blacksmiths (Picture: Sarah L. Christian)

was built, a black-painted timber structure ran parallel with the road.

This was the shoeing shop. The forge was in the single-storey building, the chimney now having long gone.

The smith James Kneale, from Bride, learned his trade in Jurby and Ballaugh before

settling in Sulby.

His son Thomas followed him into the trade.

The house is now in a poor state and planning permission has been approved for a pair of three-bedroom detached dwellings.

The agreed design ensures that someone will reside in a

house that could be almost anywhere.

Let's hope they erect a black-painted shed or at least call one of them The Old Smithy!

• References: Mac Ruairi, S (1977). Chergey-ny-mayrey, Sheerwater Press, Onchan. Folk Life Survey.



The old Smithy in Sulby, now called 'Sabrew'. It is for sale with permission for demolition and replacement with two new dwellings. The smithy chimney has gone as has the black timber shoeing shed (Picture: Sarah L. Christian)