

BUILDINGS AT RISK

Quirks of fate at Knockaloe: a tale of enterprise and survival

In this, the latest of the Examiner's Buildings at Risk series of articles, Patricia Newton looks into the story of the farms at Knockaloe. Best known today for having been the location for a large internment camp for 'enemy aliens' in the First World War, and until recently a Government-owned agricultural training centre, Knockaloe was formerly of note as the location for two model farms demonstrating new farming methods to islanders.

Enterprise and survival has always been at the heart of Knockaloe - a name which literally means 'Olaf's, Olane's, Calley's or Callow's Hill'.

In the 16th century, the original Knockaloe Beg Quarterland was so large that it was subdivided into 'Beg' (little) and 'Mooar' (large) farms.

The former acquired Contrary Head, Peel Hill and adjoining lands, while 'Mooar' encompassed the land now making up Patrick village and its surroundings.

In 1711, the then owners, the Radcliffe family, were persuaded by Bishop Wilson to sell off land for the building of a church, churchyard, vicarage house and garden (see www.isle-of-man.com/manxnotebook/index.htm).

As recompense, the farm became tithe-free, a hugely important advantage for the 200 acres of 'Mooar', which was located on quality grain-growing soils, as well as having quantities of clay base pasture land for stock.

Family history and inheritance did not fare so well, however, with 'Mooar' passing down through the female line of the family and cousins, albeit not wholly to the farm's disadvantage.

One owner married a brewer from Peel, who presumably made good use of the acres of grain until coastal erosion washed the brewery away in a storm in the 1830s.

Another owner married a Quirk of Ballavargher, St John's; and their son married an heiress, a Christian, of Scarlett Farm, Malew, who was related to the influential Christian family of Milntown near Ramsey.

Next door at Ballamoar, George Moore and his son Philip Moore were noted agriculturalists. Also related to the family at Knockaloe Mooar but generally living across the water was John Christian Curwen.

Born in 1756 as John Christian of Unerigg (or Ewanrigg) near Maryport in Cumberland, he also inherited Milntown and took the name Curwen in 1790 following his second marriage to his cousin Isabella Curwen and moving to her ancestral home of Workington Hall in Cumber-



A modern view of Knockaloe Mooar with the entrance to the farmstead behind the house

land. As John Christian Curwen, and with the unique status of being both an MHK and MP, he later founded the Westmoreland Agricultural Society and its branch in the Isle of Man to exchange ideas for the mutual improvement of agricultural and stock.

An annual cup for the best-managed farm and 'premiums' for the best crops and bulls were awarded. By the late 1700s Knockaloe Mooar's owners were among the forefront of the island's agricultural entrepreneurs.

Curwen encouraged the positioning of farm buildings in the central location on a farm, with their siting forming a curtain wall around the midden, whose products went back into fertilising the fields. Ironically he concluded that the buildings on his own pioneering model farm at Schoose in Cumberland were not the best sited.

His threshing method was by wind power but his trains of thought can be readily seen in Manx farm layouts such as

at Ballahot, the original Ellerslie (before rebuilding during the First World War) and Knockaloe.

For many farms, threshing grain was a labour-intensive, wasteful process. Modernisation was soon on the cards and the first threshing machine came to the island from Scotland in 1793. Thomas Quayle later notes 'since that period two have been erected of a construction to be wrought by four horse; thirty-four by two horse, sixteen by water and one by steam.

'To meet the harvest of 1811 about 20 others are in preparation.'

Static steam-generated mills require a fixed flue.

The tall chimney flue at 'Mooar' comes from this early period.

The former slate-hung rear of the farmhouse, which was sadly later removed by the Government, was a testament, perhaps, to an adverse side-effect of having steam threshing taking place close by to a home!

The great agricultural writer Arthur Young in the 1790s wrote: 'A variety of buildings are necessary for the carrying on the business of field culture; the nature and construction of which must obviously be different, according to the kind of farm for which they are intended.

Suitable buildings – are scarcely less necessary to the husbandman than implements and machinery,... There is nothing which marks more decidedly the state of agriculture in any district than the plan and execution of the buildings.'

Plans provided for Wood's atlas in 1863, but themselves dating from 1858, show the 'model' layout of Knockaloe Mooar, including the circle of the flue. Most of the buildings represented can still be seen today, including substantial stables to accommodate 20 draught horses; they were used in 1855 to breed on from 'a very fine Blackhorse

strongly built and – bought... for the improvement of the breed of horses'; although now stripped of internal fittings, they still happily accommodate annually inmates for the heavy horses show.

On their eastward-facing end, pigeon holes in the hay loft would have helped to ensure there was meat for the table.

To the west was the mill barn; outside, facing north, was the trough where milk would have been kept cool; and opposite was a separate range of cowhouses, together with piggeries facing north to keep them out of the sun and subsequently relocated to the side in the shadow of the garden wall.

But in time the balance between corn and horn changed.

The importation of cheap grain from the United States led to a market downturn and 'Mooar' turned its back on its easy field access to the west, designed to help with the bringing in of the crop for thrashing, in order to con-

struct a west range of bull pens.

This meant the change from a U-shaped to a courtyard farmstead was complete; and subsequently a second yard was constructed to the south.

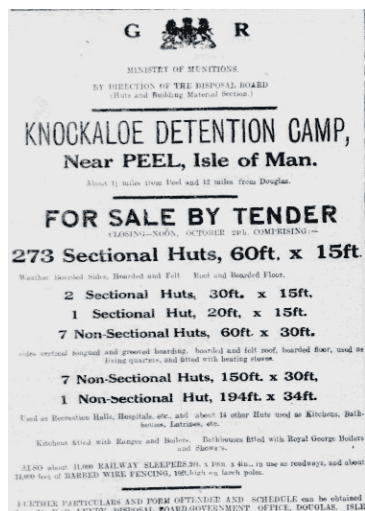
Knockaloe Beg had meanwhile been acquired by the Corrin family from the Watleworths and was maintained in a more traditional 'street' style of layout, though the hiding of a family coffin in the cool of the cellar until it could be reburied in the burial ground established by Thomas Corrin next to Corrin's Tower was hopefully a less common trait in the island!

In both farms the family lived in the 'mansion house' with the tenant living in the attached steward's house. Later done up along with an adjoining garage to form an office, at 'Mooar' this building was possibly originally like that formerly found at 'Beg', and it is now one of a few survivals of this type on the island.

By this time 'Mooar' was



An 1858 plan of the position of Knockaloe Mooar farmstead in relation to Patrick Village



A Ministry of Munitions poster advertising the sale of 'Knockaloe huts' from the former First World War detention camp for 'enemy aliens'



John Bregazzi, second agricultural organiser based at Knockaloe, with a montage of scenes of the First World War internment camp



The flue stack which used to dominate Knockaloe Mooar yard



Evidence in the stonework of how the farm buildings were extended



An aerial view of John Christian Curwen MHK and MP's pioneering model Schoose Farm near Workington in Cumbria (formerly Cumberland), where new farming methods were demonstrated that inspired agricultural reform across the water in the Isle of Man

largely tenanted until young heirs from the family reached the age of their majority; however, starting from legal action being taken over leases which had been drawn up when he was still a minor, and despite him becoming an award-winning farmer, one heir, Robert Charles Quirk, ended up being chased for £4,000 of debt and the Coroner ordered the sale of the farm.

'Lies well to the sun, extensively drained by late proprietor, buildings in centre of farm, very rare that so magnificent a farm is to be obtained in the island', stated the sale prospectus; and at its auction in 1868 'the assemblage cheered heartily' when Knockaloe Mooar was bought by the son of the owner of 'Beg', Robert Corrin.

As he was a developer of the fishing industry in Peel, the farm was again leased out on annual leases, which would not have helped its productivity, but Corrin repaid the money that would have been paid as tithe to fund the building of a new church to replace the by now poorly maintained Rad-

cliffe one.

His sons later leased 'Mooar' to Robert Kneen who, following its use for volunteers' 'Terrier' camps in the early 1900s, oversaw it being surrounded by barbed wire for its subsequent First World War use as an internment camp.

Soon stooks of corn were outnumbered by tents and examples of the infamous 'Knockaloe Hut'.

After the end of hostilities, ridding Knockaloe of huts and their concrete bases - its driveway walls are now composed of fragments of the latter - took nearly 10 years. First Rudolph Braili, a ship-owning entrepreneur of Austro-Hungarian descent (but, through having a Welsh mother, who had not been interned), and then the Agricultural Board, which had been established in 1915 to fulfil the terms of Trustees of philanthropist Henry Bloom Noble to find a suitable site for an 'experimental farm' where farmers and farmers' wives could be taught good agricultural practices, cleared the camp. 'Almost normal

for farming purpose,' was the claim from George Wylie Howie, first agricultural organiser of the farm in 1930.

Prize bulls, stallions and rams were bought in to serve the island's stock to produce better-quality animals; fields were sown with different quantities and types of fertiliser for different crops to see what worked best; marketing boards and a young farmers' association were established; tuberculin testing in cattle and dairies was initiated; butter-making was taught; and seed potatoes were improved.

The women's Land Army, tractor gangs, and artificial insemination of cattle were all introduced during the Second World War and the buildings buzzed.

It was more like a 'demonstration farm', said John Bregazzi, the second director in 1962 - and grandson of the First World War tenant farmer Kneen. Commercial daffodil and shelter-belt planting, silaging in Dorset wedges and wrapped bales were among newer introductions.

More modern buildings

were constructed around the older ones, including the 1916 railway engine shed built for the special branch of the Isle of Man Railway serving the internment camp - there's always a need for storage.

But the government chose to end it all and, in 2010, the last of the stock were sold off, and the office closed.

Now only the more modern buildings - one for the island's wool bale - and a temporary classroom are used.

Were the cattle who ate the Three Legs of Man symbol on the hillside just before the first Agricultural Show to be held at Knockaloe in 2011 seeking revenge?

With its swings and roundabouts, Knockaloe's family history is not unique on the island, but with its influences on farming development in the early 1800s mirrored 100 years later in its use as 'demonstration' farm, the importance of retaining its structures should be recog-

nised. Leased initially to a number of farmers, the fields are used but the old ranges at 'Mooar' remain empty and, along with its unique flue stack, at risk.

'Beg's' farm buildings have undergone a private transformation to holiday accommodation, albeit, contrary to the recommendation of an appeal inspector, its older houses were permitted to be demolished and replaced.

The Knockaloe Charity is renovating the former Patrick School, on former 'Mooar' land, as a centre to commemorate the world-wide importance of its internment camp history, hopefully acquiring and refurbishing one or two of the camps symbolic structures - the symbolic Knockaloe Hut.

Made out of timber sections, these were advertised in various sizes and sold off for reuse as bungalows around the island, chiefly near railway routes.

Contact info@knockaloe.im or call 07624 483261 if you have one you would be willing to donate to them.

● Unlike their parents, many of those performing in this year's Young Farmers Concerts will never have the opportunity of appreciating how much Knockaloe actually helped and meant to an older generation.

The physical remains should not be allowed to be swallowed up.

Registration of buildings and structures is not just about conserving the island's architect-designed buildings, or even those that are generally considered attractive or anyone's particular favourite; the importance of the entity should be recognised - basic Manx vernacular architecture local materials, local designs, albeit with evidence of the influence of the spread of new technology and practice from 'across', local build and surviving in reasonably intact form.

Government enterprise should match these private undertakings at Knockaloe Beg and Patrick School in finding new sustainable uses for its own 'model' Knockaloe Mooar buildings and structures.