

## BUILDINGS AT RISK

# Gone and forgotten: Manx International Exhibition

Our Buildings at Risk series covers buildings and structures currently at risk, saved, and lost. This week, it highlights a set of buildings and a site now lost - physically and from most memories. Dave Martin and Frank Cowin of the Alliance for Building Conservation look at how, if not properly recorded, not only buildings but their memories and footprint can disappear as well.

How many of those enjoying a fast-food meal on Peel Road, possibly accompanied by 'Happy Meal' cartoon figures, are aware that the surrounding area once played host to real cowboys and Indians, lions and tigers?

Or how many enjoying an oriental-flavoured burger know a traditionally-built Japanese house once stood nearby?

And how many young pirates realise that a massive Naval wooden-wall was based but a few hundred metres away?

True, some of those competing outdoors at the National Sports Centre may be aware that the area has a long and rich history as a sporting venue - but in the last decade of the 1800s, Belle Vue, as it was known, was far more than that.

Ballabrooie meadows is a wedge-shaped natural basin bound to the north by Peel Road from the Quarter Bridge to Pulrose Bridge, on the west by the Quarterbridge-Castle-town road, and to the south, it extended beyond the river.

These were riverside fields, providing grazing for the dairy herds which supplied the rapidly-growing population of Douglas with milk.

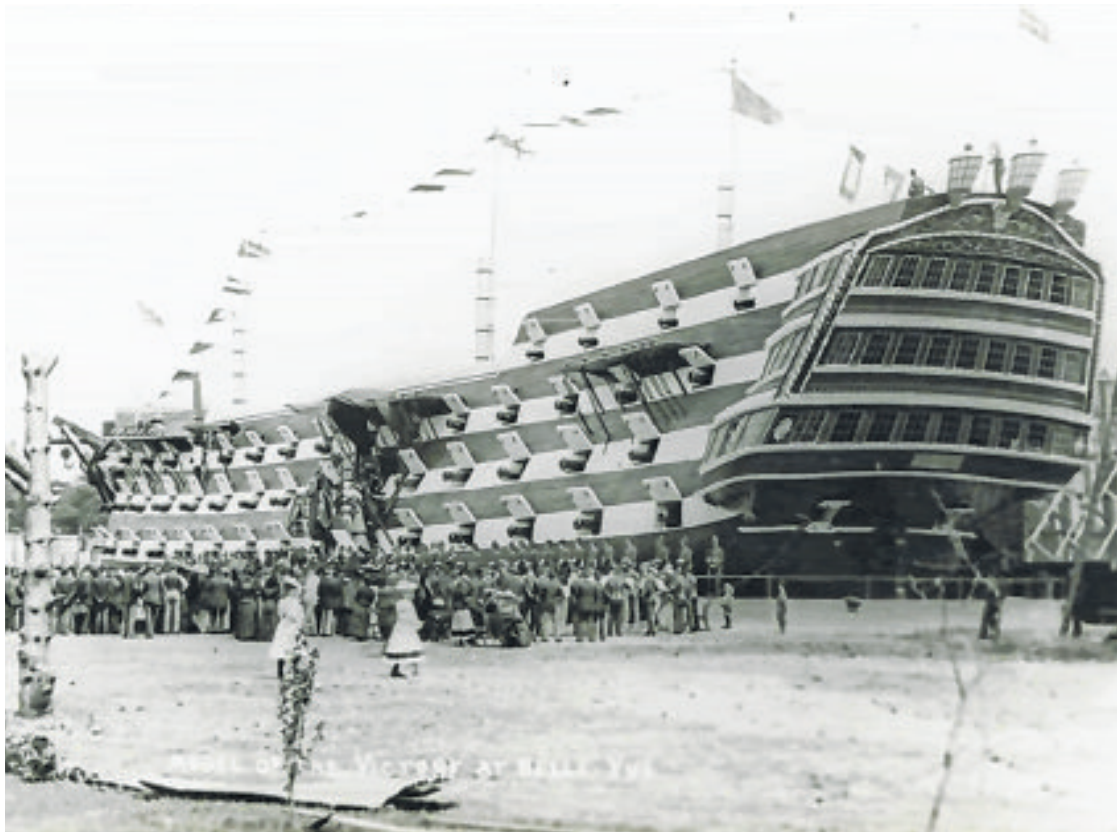
However, when the first steam railway line on the island was built in 1873 between Douglas and Peel (which incidentally crossed Ballabrooie meadows) it also meant fresh produce and milk could easily be brought into Douglas from further afield.

During the late 1800s, commercially-run sporting and entertainment grounds had developed in and around Douglas for the amusement of residents and visitors, including the Falcon Cliff / Olympia development with its own mini 'Crystal Palace'.

Several of these 'amusement grounds' included tracks, used for cycling and athletics.

One of the last of these amusement grounds or parks to be developed was on Ballabrooie meadows.

J.W. Johnson from Dalton-in-Furness first bought Ballaughton Mill, then the meadows. By July 1889 he had altered the course of the



HMS Victory replica on the day the International Exhibition opened (Manx Museum iMuseum)

river, created a boating lake and facilities for many sports (where world athletics records would later be set) alongside the amusement park.

By the following year, a circus was added, along with a larger 'Switch-Back', and it had been christened 'Belle Vue Park' (possibly after Belle Vue in Manchester).

## INDUSTRIAL ENLIGHTENMENT

In 1851, the 'Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations' was held in the specially-constructed Crystal Palace in Hyde Park, London. Organised by Prince Albert and members of the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, it celebrated and promoted modern industrial technology and design.

The Isle of Man was represented at Crystal Palace

- indeed the noted Manx naturalist Edward Forbes was responsible for curating a section.

Manxmen had a presence at some of the follow-on regional exhibitions including in Liverpool and Glasgow and won medals and prizes for their net-making machinery as far afield as Paris.

In 1888, the idea of the island having its own 'Industrial Exhibition' was raised, but one of the issues was where it could be held.

By 1891 Johnson's amusement park at Ballabrooie meadows was in full swing in commodious grounds, and it was agreed that the 'Isle of Man International Exhibition of Manufactures, Science and Art' would be held at, and in conjunction

with, Belle Vue Park. General manager Henry Pearson was appointed, and arrangements progressed speedily in typical Victorian fashion.

As well as local exhibitors, agents were appointed in London and Liverpool to recruit from off-island.

The stalls weren't just marquees - massive long ranges of buildings were constructed around three sides of a quadrangle by builder W.E. Kelly under local architect J.E. (Joe) Douglas, giving a total of 120,000 square feet of high-quality and airy exhibition space.

Each building was 40ft wide by 34ft high, and while they didn't have the 'greenhouse' construction seen at Crystal Palace, they did maximise use of natural light; the massive 20ft tall rolled-glass rooflights running almost the full length of the buildings.

The floor-level of all these halls was 4ft above ground

level - not as we might imagine nowadays for flood avoidance, but to provide easy and structured access for all the services. Shades of the modern false-floored office!

Partly to demonstrate industrial prowess and innovation, and partly to control costs, the International Exhibition generated its own electricity - their power station was not too far away from where several new Douglas power stations have been built.

In the halls, manufacturers demonstrated exciting novelties such as electrically heated curling tongs.

The Exhibition also had its own supply of gas. 'Biofuels' may be thought a relatively recent development, but in 1892 the International Exhibition was furnished with 'Mansfield's Patent Oil-Gas Apparatus for the manufacture of Gas from waste animal, vegetable and mineral oil, dripping, and any greasy substance'.

The plant was claimed to be so simple, it would only take a

day or two to train a Manx boy to operate it.

The gas was used to power engines around the site such as the well-known Crossley and Tangye, and the more novel Otto-cycle 'Stockport' engines exhibited by Messrs. Cain and Broadbent; as well as for heat, cooking and illumination.

The actual construction of some exhibits proved almost as interesting as the finished buildings - in particular, a Japanese house which was built from scratch by Dengie Baba-San and some of his countrymen.

Local carpenters were surprised by the modest Japanese toolkit and were greatly intrigued by the Japanese 'nokogiri' long-handled pull-saw.

## ATTRACTIONS

The Manx theme was set by the 14 foot high statue of 'Mona, Queen of the Isle' in her Norse galley, at the main entrance. The exhibition halls themselves held commercial, industrial and manufacturing displays and stalls.

The area between the halls was laid to gardens with bandstands and kiosks, and also contained the onion-dome topped Circus (inspired by the Brighton pavilion?) which was said to seat 1,000. There was also a large pavilion and an outdoor arena to the west of the main exhibition halls.

The arena and circus/pavilion played host not only to conventional circus turns and entertainers, but also to exciting acts including some of 'Will Bill' Cody's troupe.

There was much speculation during construction when a ring of 16 iron columns were erected in the middle of the park - each 35ft tall atop 6ft of masonry, crowned by rings of iron girders.

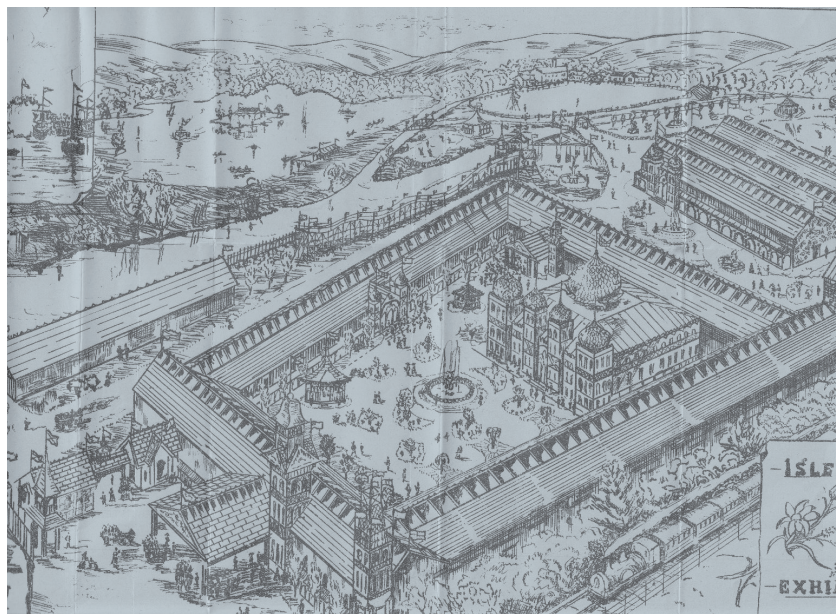
Whilst it was known the site would generate its own gas, and have its own gasometer, there was surprise it was so central and public.

Some then suggested, when they saw a glass roof being fitted, it was to be a mirrored dancing pavilion!

In fact, it was to house a dramatic panorama.

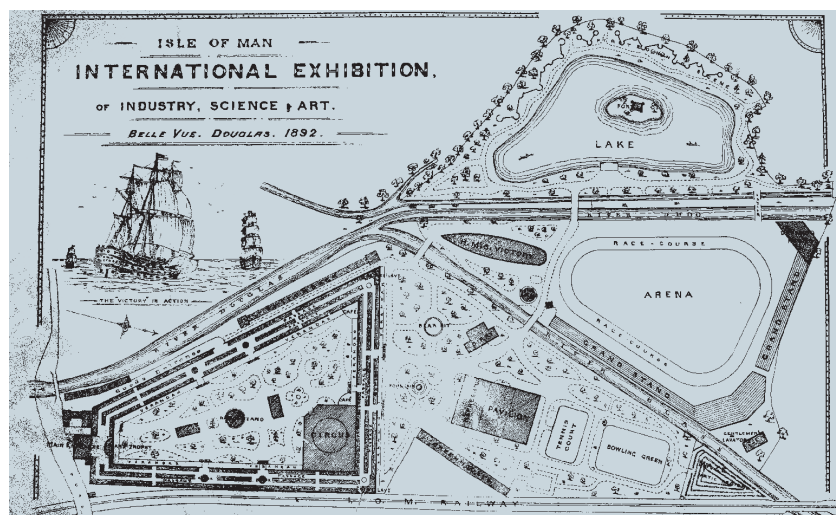
Several of the main attrac-





The exhibition halls

(Peter Kelly)



Plan of the exhibition site

(Manx Museum Library)



Programme cover

(Manx Museum Library)

tions at the Manx International Exhibition had come directly from the Royal Naval Exhibition of 1891 at Chelsea Royal Hospital in London.

In 1892 'VR' stood for Victoria Regina, but the supposed gasometer in the park housed what we might nowadays describe as 360-degree immersive VR (Virtual Reality).

Visitors ascended an internal staircase inside a three-storey viewing tower in the centre of the dome, and when they emerged onto the top viewing platform, it was as if you were stood on the poop of HMS Victory as she broke the French/Spanish line during the fateful battle off Cape Trafalgar.

The foreground was laid out to show the deck of HMS Victory at the time Admiral Lord Nelson fell, while all around the whole circumference of the goft diameter dome was seamlessly lined by a 34ft high panoramic painting of the clashing fleets by Ernest Philipp Fleischer of Breslau.

The most striking exhibit was a full-size replica of HMS Victory, as she was at Tra-



E.J. (Joe) Douglas – architect (Photo: Peter Kelly)

falgar, complete with 'battle damaged' masts.

**T**he lower gun-decks were laid out with the port side cleared for action and the guns run out, while to starboard hammocks and mess tables showed the men's living conditions.

The cockpit where Nelson died contained a tableau of wax figures by the son of Mad-

ame Tussaud whose accuracy was perhaps too realistic for some!

Here on the island (but perhaps not at London) the scene included the then Lt. John Quilliam, the wax model said to have been wearing Quilliam's actual uniform.

Also brought from London was a small fleet of miniature vessels which operated on the lake, where battleships (10 feet long) and other units engaged in combat, firing 'real' cannon.



Bronch Boccaccio, The Lion Tamer (Manx Museum library)



Henry Pearson (Manx Museum library)

#### AFTER THE SHOW?

After the Manx International Exhibition, Henry Pearson went on to even greater things, helping to organise the Chicago International Exhibition. The amusement/entertainment park closed in 1896, and Belle Vue reverted to just a sporting venue, including the infamous horse-racing circuit.

Whilst sporting heritage continues, nothing physical

remains.

The neglected HMS Victory replica was destroyed by fire in 1899. After the exhibition, the buildings were removed.

**O**ne was relocated to Lower Sulby farm in Onchan because its height and airy roof space were suitable to shelter traction engines.

This stood until a few years

ago – permission was approved at planning appeal to convert it to flats so the structure could be saved, but it was later demolished. One of the biggest tragedies in the aftermath of the International Exhibition is how little is now known of it.

Tight exhibition rules apparently prohibited photography, so whilst visitor programmes and newspaper reports survive, there is remarkably little visual record.

The exhibition must have been incredibly well known to all on the island in 1892 – but now?

This does go to show that while some buildings and structures may not be suitable for re-use or worthy of conservation, relying on 'everybody knows about it' is not a valid long-term strategy for recording them.

Information on the Alliance for Building Conservation can be found at [www.abc.org.im](http://www.abc.org.im) and for background on the evolution of Belle Vue Park to the NSC see John Wright's booklet of the same name and the Manx newspapers in the iMuseum.