

BUILDINGS AT RISK

Knockaloe huts: A reminder of island's wartime history

Some of the huts which were at Knockaloe internment camp during the First World War were later repurposed and put to new use. Here, Peter Kelly of the Isle of Man Victorian Society, takes a look at what happened to some of them.

As we draw closer to November 11, we will be reminded more and more of the centenary of the end of The Great War, with special services and events taking place across the country.

While in Europe there are the battlefields, now so different to the trenches and mud of the period 1914-18, and the huge military cemeteries, there are few vestiges in Britain.

Here on the Isle of Man we have something of a reminder all around us, yet we don't see it.

Shortly after the outbreak of the war in August 1914, Cunningham's Holiday Camp in Douglas was requisitioned for the establishment of an alien internee camp, utilizing the facilities enjoyed by countless young men only weeks before.

The difference was the high wire fencing and the presence of guards.

The first consignment of 200 internees arrived on September 22, 1914.

Following a visit by the Civilian Internment Camps Committee, it was decided to erect a new camp at Knockaloe Moar in Patrick on land often used for summertime Volunteer and Territorial Army Camps.

The contract for building the huts to accommodate the internees went to Mark Carine (pronounced Caren) who, only a few years before, had been building Arts and Crafts houses at Little Switzerland to the designs of Armitage Rigby.

By the end of October, he had 70 men working on site and the first batch of aliens arrived on November 17, 1914.

Other camps had been established elsewhere in Britain, but the insular position of the Isle of Man in terms of security appealed to the British authorities.

Camps were closed and the aliens sent to Knockaloe, which originally had been designed to be a camp for 5,000 and ended up with 23,000 aliens, together with guards and civilian staff.

Sectional huts were produced by joinery manufacturers in the UK and shipped to the island, along with huts that had been used in the temporary camps.



Hut re-erected on the Patrick Road which later had a brick skin built around it and a 1970's two storey extension on the right hand side. The dwelling is still there to this day



This bungalow was previously to be found next to Marown TV on the main road at Glen Vine. It was demolished a few years ago and replaced by a two-storey house. This was a sample of a straight hut built up on brick pillars and having an outside toilet



A small section of Knockaloe Alien Internment Camp which was large enough to accommodate the population of Douglas. Timber boarding and hopper windows which were retained in their re-erection as dwellings or recreation buildings

Huts were also erected at Cunningham's Camp in Douglas, although for the first winter the internees were faced with having to survive in the bell tents.

After the war, Joseph Cunningham benefitted through having ready-made chalets at his holiday camp.

At Knockaloe, it was a different matter, with countless wooden huts capable of accommodating the population of Douglas.

Not all the huts at Knockaloe belonged to the British Government.

Some belonged to the YM-CA and provided recreational facilities for the guards.

There was also an 'Industrial Section' of the camp and on May 29, 1919, a local auctioneer advertised that he was to hold an auction on behalf of 'the representatives of the Industrial Section of Knockaloe'. There had already been a sale of joiners' tools, benches, grips, spades, paint, varnishes, oil, brooms and sundry effects.

This sale was for three huts 41 feet, 35 feet and 25 feet long, constructed out of

the best seasoned timber with felt roof, windows, partitions, floors and doors.

Next, the British Government, through the Disposals Board, put the whole camp up for sale.

This included the whole of the 379 acre farm, together with farm buildings, railway siding, sewage plant, etc, including approximately 570 sectional huts 60 feet by 15 feet; 20 dining huts 150 feet by 30 feet and 60 other huts of all

sizes up to 320 feet by 30 feet used as kitchens, latrines and three hospital blocks.

The camp was still occupied by internees up until the autumn of 1919, so not all the huts were available immediately.

Mr Leigh Goldie-Taubman of The Nunnery had set up the Manx Discharged and Demobilised Sailors and Soldiers Association and bought three huts.

They sought tenders in December 1919 for dismantling and re-erection of the huts; one hut 75 feet by 30 feet at

Boiley Spittal, Peel; one 60 feet by 30 feet alongside the MER Station at Laxey and another the same size at Ballasalla, but this may have ended up at Ballabeg.

The MDDSS later merged into the British Legion and these buildings became the local branch headquarters.

In January 1920, it was announced that the Imperial Disposal Board had sold the camp as it stood, together with railway, sewerage plant, all buildings (quoted as more than 1,000) and an electric power plant that was suitable



Still surviving this 'designed' Knockaloe hut is to be found on Hillberry Road, Onchan and is currently being renovated despite an attempt of unplanned demolition by a Bus Vannin bus backing in to it



To be found at the bottom of Quine's Hill on the Old Castletown Road, this hut had a lean-to green house on the rear elevation which shows here. The original hopper windows remained until the end. The bungalow was demolished in the 1980s and a large stone faced bungalow erected on the plot around it that had been used as a market garden



Bray Villa, Tromode Road was one of two huts erected just outside the Douglas Borough boundary in the parish of Onchan. Plans were prepared by Jos E Teare and he used sections of hut at rightangles to each other in order to take away the internment hut appearance. Both properties are still occupied as dwellings

to generate enough electricity for a town totalling 100,000 people.

The purchaser was Rudolf Demetrius Brailli of Ravenscliff, on Douglas Head.

Brailli announced that he would be keeping a lot of the buildings for industry, but a large number of sectional huts were available for sale that could be utilised as bungalows, dwelling houses and buildings suitable for farmers and others.

He set up a company, Insular Trading Co Ltd, to handle the sales.

The company also obtained the agency for Beaver Board, which was a fibreboard used for instantaneous wall and ceiling finishes.

Later versions of this product were sold as Celotex.

He also made arrangements with Jos E Teare, a local architect, who would produce plans for people wishing to erect them as dwellings.

On the opposite side of the Patrick Road, he had a hut

erected as a bungalow for the site manager in charge of dismantling the huts.

By December 1920, nearly 200 huts had been shipped from Peel to England and Northern Ireland.

Brailli died suddenly on 23rd October 1921.

A series of sales were held to dispose of everything else left on site and on October 10 1923 it was announced that the Isle of Man Board of Agriculture had purchased the farm, thanks to a gift of £20,000 from the Henry Bloom Noble Trustees.



Plans for this hut were prepared by Jos E Teare for Mr Robert Brown and approved for building bye-laws in June 1922. It had a single living room/kitchen with two bedrooms leading off. The toilet was outside on the plot on Hillberry Road in Onchan Parish. When this photograph was taken the render on wire mesh on the right hand side of the dwelling has been removed revealing the original timber boarding. The owner embarked on a scheme and succeeded in building a new bungalow around the hut whilst still living in it. When the walls and roof were up he demolished the Knockaloe hut from inside the new dwelling.

Where are the Knockaloe huts now?

Douglas Corporation had its own Building Bye-laws which resulted in no Knockaloe huts being permitted as dwellings within the town.

One large hut from the Douglas Camp was approved and erected, however, as an assembly hall/gymnasium at Park Road School.

Very close to the Douglas boundary, two bungalows were erected during 1920 in Tromode Road, Onchan, overlooking Port-e-Chee Meadow.

They were called 'Meadow View' and 'Bray Villa', but were designed to be architecturally interesting, rather than just a straight re-erection of a hut as it had been.

Also in Onchan parish, three were erected on Hillberry Road, one like a hut and the other two 'designed'.

The latter two still exist, even though a Bus Vannin single-decker did try to wipe out one of them recently.

Another hut was erected on Ballanard Road and here the walls were finished externally with asbestos sheets like the huts at Cunningham's Camp.

That one made way for a modern house in the 1980s.

Other huts often had expanded metal mesh nailed to the shiplap wooden boards, then this was rendered with cement.

Some had a skin of brick added around the outside and this was pebbledashed.

Opposite the former Highlander Public House on the road to Peel, three huts were erected.



Erected in the early 1920s this Knockaloe hut still has a commercial use in Kirk Michael

They were taller than most and the 'pair' still exist; the single dwelling was replaced by a modern bungalow.

Close to Ballaleece Bridge near St Johns, 'Riverside' is a former Knockaloe hut, as is a property near to Ballaspit on the Patrick Road.

This has had a brick skin on the outside and a two storey extension on the right-hand side.

At Baldrine, Mr Walthew had one built alongside Cronk Dhoo called 'The Cabin', which survived until burning down in the 1980s.

Another was erected on the Clay Head Road, but was replaced by a modern bungalow.

Two others are to be found behind Baldrine Methodist Chapel and at Baldromma MER crossing.

In the centre of Kirk Michael, the equine shop, formerly a hairdressers, is

another example that has survived.

The Knockaloe hut at Niarbyl, that has been a cafe and latterly a shell shop, came in to the hands of the Manx Museum who took it down and placed it in storage.

Another hut used as a bungalow was to be found alongside Moon's Garage, but this too has gone.

Two of the larger huts were erected and used for entertainment at Port Erin; Leslie's Pavilion off Victoria Square and in Bradda Glen.

Perhaps the most famous recycling of a Knockaloe hut was St Anthony's Church in Onchan, which opened in 1923 and served until the mid-1980s.

This list is not exhaustive and Peter Kelly would be delighted to hear from you if you know of any others, or if you have any photographs of them that can be copied.

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