

## BUILDINGS AT RISK

# John Welch: much more than a church architect

Frank Cowin continues his look at the work of early 19th century Manx architects, much of whose work is unrecognised, unprotected, and at risk.

This article follows on from the last one published a fortnight ago (November 27) and continues the consideration of the churches and chapels which are a group of buildings at great risk.

We view them through the architects working during the episcopacy of Bishop Ward.

This week we continue to look at the work, views and life of the outspoken John Welch.

In the book 'A Six Days Tour' by 'A Stranger' but attributed to John Welch, it says of the Anglican Church at Kirk Michael: "The beautiful new church, lately built by Mr John Welch, is of the transept form, the masonry of which is beautifully executed."

This follows his usual praise of some and often scurrilous comment on others.

The church had been consecrated in May 1835, and John Mason Neale, commenting in 1849 on the Manx Churches, says: "The church is new, but there are three very fine crosses at the entrance of the churchyard."

However this church of all those designed by Welch is the most like the average English parish church both in appearance and plan.

In Douglas following true to form, Welch, looking from the sea, says: "The east end of the new church called St Barnabas, with its noble group of lancet windows, should be open to the bay. The spire, though, is in a diabolical taste, painted black."

He continues: "Some pity should be taken upon the miserable tower of St George's, on the hill, which might be rendered much less ugly at a comparatively trifling cost."

"The architect of that structure seems to have been labouring under some extraordinary convulsion of mind while it was in progress: the inside is very good; externally it is the rankest compound of villainous taste that ever offended our vision."

The building of St George's had started in 1761 but had stopped for eight years in the aftermath of Revestment and as a consequence the church was not completed until 1780 and consecrated in 1781.

The design was the prod-



Plans for Thornton

uct of a committee who had copied ideas from a church in Whitehaven.

John Mason Neale commenting on it following his visit in 1848 says: "...built in 1780 is as ugly as might be expected, an oblong building, with a circular apse, and a clumsy western tower."

Of St Barnabas, Neale said: "...is intended for 'first pointed' [early English], and has a spire one hundred and forty feet high."

"Its 15 clere storey windows are outrageous beyond badness." [clere windows are an upper row of windows – the clerestory – in the nave of a

church.]

St Barnabas was designed by John Welch, the foundation stone being laid by the Bishop, William Ward, in June 1832 and consecrated in June of the same year.

This seems a remarkably short period to build such a church and this, combined with the fact that it contained two tiers of balcony was probably the reason that another architect, John Taggart (whose work is to be considered in a further article) was called in to certify that it was safe.

The first chaplain was Dr William Carpenter, who was also chaplain of the floating



The Scotch Kirk, Finch Road, designed by John Welch



St Andrew's (the 'Scotch Kirk'), in Douglas, just before the main church was demolished to make offices

chapel.

The floating chapel, or Mariners' Chapel, was a redundant Naval frigate that the Bishop had obtained from Earl Grey (who gave his name to the variety of tea).

Tied up alongside at the top of Douglas harbour, it was initially well supported. But it eventually had to be broken up and the materials sold, the most valuable being the cast iron used as ballast; and the monies given to the building fund for St Thomas's.

There were moves to close St Barnabas in 1937 but there was so much opposition that they were abandoned.

However it closed in 1957 and was later demolished.

John Welch was also architect for the first 'Scotch Kirk' in Douglas, the commission for this coming from James M'Crone, the Duke of Atholl's factor, for whom Welch also designed what he described as the "...the beautiful 'Old English' mansion of James M'Crone Esq."

When Welch goes to Port St Mary, he writes: "I perceive a Methodist Chapel built here, on the most beautiful site the village affords, which has been

copied from the Scotch Kirk at Douglas; and these ingenious imitations have contrived also to copy sundry errors and mistakes too; which reminds me of what is said of an English captain getting a new coat made by a Chinese tailor, and sending the knight of the celestial thimble an old patched and mended one as a pattern; when the new coat was done, and sent home, the captain found, to his great astonishment and mortification, that not only had the form and size of the old garment been most minutely copied, but every patch and stitch, the artist fancying that such were some



Kirk Michael Church

(photo: Peter Killey, manxscenes.com)



The Harbour from Douglas Head, with two of John Welch's creations - 'The Towers' in the foreground, and St Barnabas in the distance



Hotel plans

road above mentioned.  
Unfortunately for him it was some 40 years before this happened!

**H**e was also involved in the design of a number of houses.

In 1834 he published advertisements saying: 'John Welch Architect Begg respectfully to inform the Public that he has prepared a number of designs for Cottages, Villas etc in a variety of styles to which he has endeavoured to combine Economy of Arrangement and Design with a degree of Taste and Appearance "To the Gentlemen who would so honour him by a call they are open for inspection at his office, Athol Court, every day from 10 to 4".

Amongst his bigger residential commissions were The Towers on Douglas Head, Thornton on Peel Road, and probably one along the road to Peel of which he says: 'We have on our right Ballavar, the country seat of Thomas Howard Esq. better known as the Duke of Norfolk, who in his young days occupied a similar post in society to that of Beau Nash at Bath, and took the lead in all kinds of devilment.

'He is the only man in the country who literally lives upon his wits, and who is con-

sequently considered one of the cleverest fellows in it ...

'... my friend The Duke who is in fact the index, the table of reference, the walking geography of Man, and, moreover an author. Who has not heard of Howard's Vade Meccum?

'... a regular 'Bon Vivant', who yet in his sixty-fourth year, can sing a song, crack a joke, give a bottle a black eye, or make a beef-steak look foolish, with any man in the country.

'To all these accomplishments he adds but one detracting quality, 'his worst fault is' as Mrs Quickly said of her master, Dr Causis, 'he is too much given to praying.'

One of the most 'public' structures John Welch was involved with is the Smelt memorial, of which he says: 'The Parade is a fine open square, where the market is held, in the centre of which it is in contemplation, I understand, to erect a monument to the memory of the late Lieutenant Governor Cornelius Smelt, who for 28 years presided over the affairs of this country.

The design, suggested by Sir William Hillary, Bart., is a Grecian Doric column, upon an elevated base, and is to be executed of White freestone, under the direction of Mr. John Welch, Architect.'

To be continued...



Smelt memorial

(photo: Manx Museum)

national decorations which he must not omit.' The Methodist Chapel he saw has since been demolished. It had stood on the site now occupied by the British Legion Garden.

**W**elch did not only design churches but also a fairly wide range of projects including an hotel which is possibly the one he intended for the site at Douglas harbour of which he says: 'On the site of the dram-shop now occupied by Hanby, on the other side, at the root of the tongue of masonry called the pier, is a noble

stand for a hotel; and connected as these premises are with the extensive yard and stables adjoining, and, from their contiguity to the water, affording an extraordinary facility for constructing an extensive and beautiful range of baths of every description, there can be no hesitation in asserting, that if an establishment of this kind were effected here, it would take precedence of all the hotels in the town, and skim the cream of all their business; for there it would stand, with open arms as it were, at the very mouth of the country, and catch all who attempted to enter.

'It would, moreover, be a

public benefit as well as a capital private investment.'

This is now gone, if it was ever built!

Another hotel which he claims to have visited, he described as: 'The Peel Castle Hotel, kept by a blooming widow, Mrs Thomas, a very comfortable house, lately fitted up in a superior style by the late Mr Thomas.'

John Welch clearly had involvement, or hoped to, in many projects which were carried out or which he proposed should happen such as reclaiming of land from the sea at Douglas by: 'the ... extending of the new line of road now forming under the castle

to the very end of Fort Street, thus making a communication and splendid drive by way of the Parade, from the pier to the Crescent, without passing through the wretched outskirts which now form the only direct avenue to the castle.

'It were to be wished the whole of the line of mouldering hovels which constitute Sand Street and part of Fort Street were totally demolished, and in their place substituted some good houses fronting the sea and the proposed road.

'A vast deal of land may, it is very evident, be gained from the sea below the town, besides what is requisite for the