

BUILDINGS AT RISK

A sad end for architect and commentator on island life

We conclude our coverage of the life and works of the outrageous and unfortunate John Welch – a talented architect and writer, who in some respects had ideas ahead of his time.

This week's article continues the consideration of churches and chapels built during (or just before) the tenure of Bishop Ward. Again we do this through the architects responsible for them especially noting the views of the outrageous and unfortunate John Welch, as recorded in his book 'A Six Days Tour of the Isle of Man, by A Stranger'.

His career started with the partnership of J.A. Hansom and Edward Welch which was dissolved after the builders of the Birmingham Town Hall had gone bankrupt just before the building was complete. Unfortunately, there had been a guarantee given by Hansom and Welch which seems to have included John Welch and to have affected the three men to differing degrees.

John Welch, having taken up residency in the Isle of Man would, whilst here, be immune from prosecution for debt from the UK. Yet by 1838 he was offering to provide guarantees for buildings designed by him, and soon after was visiting the UK.

However, to continue from last time considering first the dedication of 'A Six Days Tour' which is to 'Sir William Hillary, Bart.:' 'May I take the liberty of dedicating this small work to you, as a small token of the estimation in which I hold the many great traits of your character; your philanthropy and benevolence, not less than your love and patronage of the Arts, and the liberal and enlightened policy of all your measures connected with the country you have honoured and adopted as your home.

'The Author'

Of Sir William's house the author says: 'Fort Anne, where the lover of the arts will find the best gallery of painting in the island.

'The external appearance of Fort Anne does not at all correspond with its internal elegance and comfort; neither is it possible by any species of mending (unless at an enormous cost) to make it better; such was the surpassing genius of its first founder.

'The nearest approach to anything like style to which it is possible to bring is perhaps to the mixed Italian style of the middle ages, with its terraces



The Tower of Refuge, designed by John Welch, from his own book 'A Six Days Tour of the Isle of Man'

NOTICE is hereby given, that the Partnership heretofore existing between John Welch and John Latham, in the county of Lancaster, as Architects and Surveyors of Buildings, was dissolved, on the 17th day of September instant, by mutual consent. Dated this 24th day of September 1845.

John Welch.
John Latham.

Notice which appeared in the London Gazette, recording the demise of one of John Welch's business partnerships

and towers.'

He continues with more criticism of the building and praise for Sir William. The design of the house is attributed to George Steuart along with the Red Pier which it overlooked. Welch described that simply as 'the tongue of masonry called a pier'.

Sir William had made a design for the Smelt memorial (Examiner, December 11 2018) which Welch had brought to fruition. Welch is also thought to have been responsible for the George Hotel, Castletown,

and Sir William appears to have been involved, with others including Mr Gawne, Ken-traugh (who again was praised by Welch) and others who raised the monies to build it in replacement of the building sold by the Duke of Athol when he finally left the island.

Sir William Hillary was one of Welch's significant patrons and was personally responsible for the whole idea, and half the funding, of the Tower of Refuge, although William Wordsworth was responsible for the name!



The George, Castletown, and the Smelt Memorial, both by John Welch

Welch seems to have liked viewing Douglas from the sea, and he writes: 'We will sail past the rock of Conister, or St Mary's, with its beautiful and picturesque tower, and take another opportunity of visiting this refuge for the ship-wrecked mariner.'

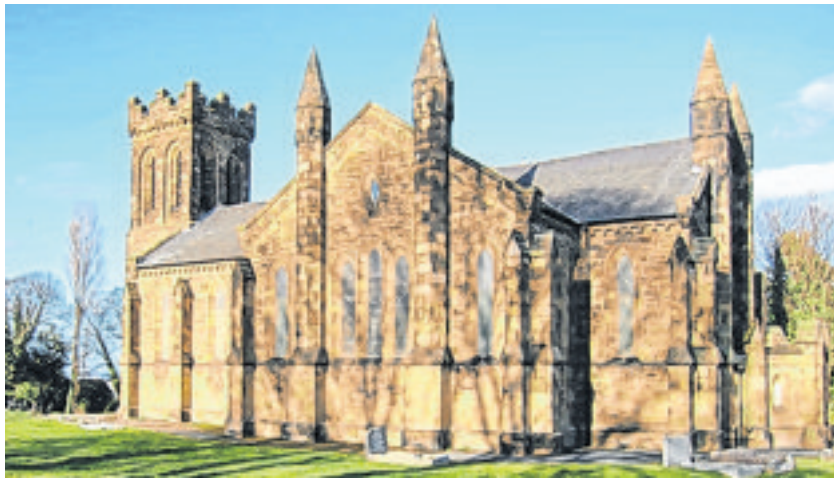
And later actually visiting

it, he said: 'The Tower of Refuge has a beautiful appearance hence. I had reserved to myself for some starry night the pleasure of visiting the picturesque Tower, which at times of high tide appears, rising out of the water, like a fairy-palace from below..'

'... The first stone of this

tower was laid by Sir William Hilary, Bart. (its projector) on April 24 1832, being St George's Day, and also the day on which Castle Mona was opened as an hotel. ... The edifice was built agreeably to the designs, and under the superintendence, of Mr John Welch, architect; and seems at this moment to defy the shocks of the sea that rages, and every wind that blows. ... After staying a time to admire the beautiful spectacle from the summit of the tower, we got into our boat again, and renewed our song until we reached the beach.'

Of another of his trips across Douglas Bay he states: 'We now made across from Banks Howe to Douglas Head, enjoying as we passed (through medium of a small telescope) the animated scene along the beach, no less than between two and three hun-



St Mary's Church, Bagilt (left) – one of those John Welch designed in North Wales – with pinnacles like St Luke's and St James, Dalby (right)



Is this the colour-coded mixed bathing John Welch envisaged, to be supervised by the 'Bathing-Bailiff or Admiral of the Beach'?

dred beings in the water at the same time, men women and children. Some paddling only ankle deep, a few plunging vigorously in, while a third party ventured hand-in-hand up to the middle, and alternately dipped, supporting each other.

A scene all too absent today. Writing just as Victoria is coming to the throne, he writes again to forecast some of the changes it will bring: 'On the banks of the Tagus, it is no unusual thing for a young lady to ask a young gentleman to go with her to bathe, to assist her in and out of the water; but there, the gentlemen, as well as ladies, wear bathing dresses.

I should recommend that practice be adopted here, unless indeed some discrimination can be made as to the space allotted for each: and in order to prevent mistakes, the dresses of the gentlemen should be of one colour, while those of the ladies were of another, like two opposing armies, some neutral personage presiding over the solemnities,

and distributing to each their proper covering, who should also have a beadle's staff and gown, or cap and bands, as insignia of office, to whom also all disputes in the water might be referred, as all matters connected with the coast, within three miles of the shore, are referred to the judgement of the water-bailiff.

I would suggest he should be denominated the Bathing-Bailiff, or Admiral of the Beach. There are two or three elderly gentlemen resident in the town, who have been what is called rather gay in early life, and whose candle is now well burnt out, to whom this office might be very judiciously entrusted.'

While being busy designing churches and viewing life on the island, Welch found time to carry out work on the Castle Mona to turn it into a hotel of which he says: 'I had been recommended to the Castle, and was received into



The curious credit to John Welch as one of the architects of Birmingham Town Hall

this magnificent and once ducal mansion, with all the attention and politeness peculiar to its worthy proprietor, Mr Heron.'

Welch was also involved in the early development of some of the nearby land, including the Falcon Cliff Estate 'now the property of Sir William Hillary'. About 1833 Welch had been responsible for The Hermitage on Peel Road just below its junction with Circular Road, with its battlements and walls typical of his style.

It formed part of the Nunnery Estate and towards the end of its life became Cunningham House, headquar-

ters of the Scout and Guide movement in the island. It was demolished and replaced with a car showroom.

In November 1834, Welch was advertising 'designs for cottages, villas etc. in a variety of styles' for inspection at his office in Athol Court.

By 1836 he had moved to the North Quay and had gone into partnership with Phillip Moore, a builder, but by 1837 this had become insolvent. In 1840 Moore was still attempting to get outstanding monies to be paid to him.

Despite the troubles, Moore's tombstone, after his death in 1855, states 'partner



Institution for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, Preston

of John Welch'.

In February 1837, Welch had prepared plans which were accepted for a new Town Hall and Market in the town of Flint, North Wales.

At the beginning of that April, it was announced that he had been instructed to prepare plans and estimates for work to the Rolls Office and the Court Room at Castle Rushen. He was, however, replaced by Thomas Brine, a rival architect, probably because of his inability to get on with it in view of growing commitments in North Wales.

In Wales he designed a number of churches, and the St Asaph workhouse, later converted to a hospital and named after one of the workhouse boys, HM Stanley (of 'Dr Livingstone I presume' fame). This closed in 2008 and is now the Livingstone Place prestige apartments. This compares with the Douglas House of Industry also designed by Welch, now the Ellan Vannin Home.

Meantime to cover his possible work in the Isle of Man he had formed in 1838 the partnership of Messrs Welch and Webbe, Architects. The offices were at the old bank which gave its name to Bank Street and Bank Hill adjoining Douglas railway station.

Their advert advises that Mr Webbe would be resident and that Mr Welch 'visits the island alternately as usual'.

John Welch next appears

in an 'Institute' in St Marylebone, Middlesex, in 1841 near where his brother Edward had moved to from Liverpool after 1838 and now lived at Mona Villa, Carlton Hill West.

John then reappears in Preston and went into partnership with another architect, John Latham; but that was dissolved by mutual consent in 1845.

In 1846, Welch was commissioned to design the 'Institute for Diffusion of Useful Knowledge' in Preston. Welch is, however, recorded in Lancaster Gaol for debt in March 1848, and the contract was completed the following year by George Latham – son of his former partner – who altered the design by adding a forecourt. The Institute closed in 1882, but the building was taken on by the Harris Trustees and altered and extended by J.V. Hibbert, and is now part of the University of Central Lancashire.

By October 1855, Welch was again, or still, in Lancaster Gaol and died there very soon after. A very sad end for someone who, if briefly, shone brightly on the island both as an architect and as commentator on island life.

But all this leaves the big question unanswered: – why, when all the records are quite clear that the architects of Birmingham Town Hall were Joseph Aloysius Hansom and Edward Welch, is carved onto a corner-stone 'Joseph Hansom / John Welch / Architects / MDCCCXXXIV'?