

## BUILDINGS AT RISK

# Archibald Knox's influence on buildings in the capital

Here, in the latest of the Examiner Buildings at Risk series of features, Patricia Newton of the Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society is contributing two articles taking a look at what famous Manx Art Nouveau designer and artist Archibald Knox's life and drawings tell us about the island's built heritage. She finds that many of the buildings he chose to draw in pen and ink in Douglas have now gone or are under threat, but that more sites merit blue plaques to emphasise his connection to them than the two such plaques in place currently.

**B**uildings are not purely the preserve of the architects who design them but have a living history in terms of who has occupied them, who has portrayed them in pictures and the stories that they can tell.

So what do the Kensington Art School, Balladoole Farm in Arbory, Old Laxey Bridge, the Trafalgar Inn in Douglas, Sulby Mill, Knockaloe Beg and the Dawsey memorial in Braddan churchyard all have in common, amongst countless other buildings and structures and localities, both identified and unidentified, in Ellan Vannin?

The answer in this case is Knox, primarily Archibald of that ilk.

The Archibald Knox Forum – led by Chris and Mary Hobdell, and which follows on from the Archibald Knox Society established by the late Liam O'Neill – has identified many of the localities associated with the great man in the Douglas area and organises guided tours around these sites.

Few of the buildings that Knox was closely associated with survive. Throughout the rest of the island, there is virtually no identification of buildings he either was known to have a direct association with, or which he drew.

Here, in the first of two articles, the case is put forward for blue plaque trails, not just the two individual plaques that exist in Douglas courtesy of Douglas Development Partnership.

Such trails could not only identify the localities he knew, but also what current architects and planners might learn from the design of these build-



Albert Hotel, rear of North Quay

ings in modifying old, and planning new, development.

In 1856, Archibald's father William followed his sister from Scotland to the Isle of Man, along with his wife and eldest son Robert.

William obtained employment at Moore's sailcloth factory at Tromode and housing in Moore's planned village of Cronkbourne, where Archibald was born in 1864.

Cronkbourne, in its entirety, is now a registered building but not before it was severely put at risk by Braddan Commissioners' plans to demolish it.

As he grew up, Archibald recorded his family's business interests and reached out to the friends that he had made during his years of education and teaching.

He earned his living not only on island but also in the South of England during two spells of teaching and designing, and also in America (in a brief fling only).

On island, he lived for a time in Sulby in the north and worked during the First World War at Knockaloe in the west; however, his longest association was with Douglas.

While now probably far better known internationally for his modern Art Nouveau silver and pewter work for Liberty's via the Silver Studio,

for whom he designed and crafted much of it here on his native island Knox, the artist, is equally valued for his imagery, primarily his watercolours of local landscapes, and weather – he was 'the man who can paint the wind'.

**W**hat is perhaps less known is the collection of pen and ink sketches of buildings and street scenes that he undertook, and which embellish the story of his life and provide a unique record of places around the island that he was associated with.

In their details they provide a unique architectural record of buildings existing in the late Victorian and Edwardian period; buildings that are not recorded in the thousands of postcard scenes and photo-



Quine's Corner, 1870

graphs of the day.

Like his older, partial contemporary John Miller Nicholson, Knox made pen and ink sketches of everyday scenes, some of which later were incorporated into watercolours.

But many of Knox's sketches, while signed by him, are not identified in terms of their location.

Archibald's father Wil-

liam's specialism was in engineering and the designing and building machinery for fishing boats.

After he established his own firm in 1871 at 24 South Quay, William's other four sons followed him into this industry. Archibald's connection was in providing drawings of the works for their letterhead; his sketches around



Cattle market street and tanyard

Douglas Harbour also show both the boat and the industrial works in the background, by the site of the gas works.

One of Archibald's brothers, Robert, married the girl next door at No 25 and later moved to Leigh Terrace.

Another brother married the daughter of John Holden, landlord of the nearby Trafalgar Inn.

Her brother was a contemporary of Archibald's at the Douglas School of Art. Although its former neighbouring buildings, the red herring houses, have since been replaced by galvanized warehouses, the Trafalgar Inn still stands as a flagship at anchor on the junction of South Quay and Head Road.

However, this building dating from 1819 is now threatened with demolition and replacement by a seven-storey office and residential block.

If we follow Knox in weaving a way through the quayside streets of Douglas, we cross an area of which, in 1882, a writer in the Illustrated London News wrote: 'The part of the town approaching the quay and market-place is very old-fashioned, and has a rather foreign aspect.'

Knox's images record some of the quirky streets and buildings of those days, such as the Tanyard in Cattle Market Street which had been purchased by his brother Robert, and the former Quine's Corner.

In Lower Douglas, Archibald Knox attended St Barnabas Elementary School and his sketches include part of St Barnabas Square.

Later John James Frowde wrote of the area: 'with its seclusion, its cobbles and the Church mixed up with it, [the Square] has for over 20 years brought to mind a similar ensemble at the rear of S. Pierre in Geneva in a violent thunderstorm.'

In this case, sadly, the thunderstorm became a tornado and the square and its surroundings were demolished.

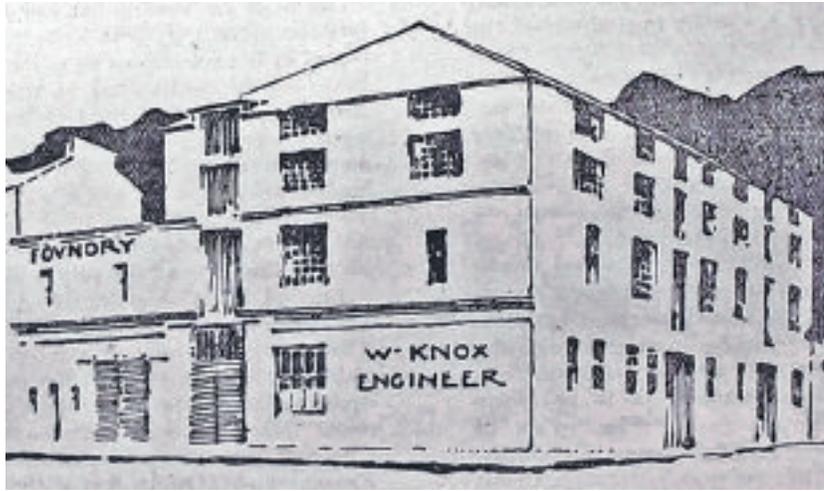
Knox attended old St Matthew's Church.

It is recorded that his 'gift of a board detailing all the ministers that have served in the sacred ministry of the church since the year 1708, in its design and finish of this welcome gift, are both characteristic of the taste and talent of this promising young artist.'

The church's mutual improvement society also noted that he 'promises to be an instructive and useful public speaker'.

Knox participated in the debate over the church's extension or replacement.

The Bishop was not keen on doing anything other than having the building demolished for the improvement of Lower Douglas and pocketing the money for the site to help



Steam ship and South Quay industry

finance the rebuilding of St George's.

The replacement current quayside site was expensive, but for those at the top end of the town, the St George's project needed labourers.

St Matthew's congregation won the day – the message was 'the souls of the poor are just as valuable as those of the higher classes'.

As regards Knox's involvement, a memorial outside the quayside replacement church still exists.

But while he was modern in his thinking on design, were he alive today – and given his apparent fondness for recording the local vernacular – what would Knox now think of another major redevelopment scheme, namely current plans to build a six-storey block next to, and dominating over, the area's local, the Albert Hotel in Chapel Row?

Moving swiftly on, Knox's geographical trail would lead him uphill to the site of his secondary education at Douglas Grammar School in Dalton Street – now replaced by the functional, if scarcely attractive, Manx Telecom building.

His headmaster there was the Rev Canon John Quine, later of All Saints, Lonan, with whom a lasting friendship would result.

His artistic skill then led to him enrolling at the Douglas School of Art, which had been founded to 'meet the requirements of those engaged in various trades and profes-



Steam ship and South Quay industry

sions, to promote the growth of Industrial Art, to supply a course of training for those adopting Art as a profession, for Teachers, for those taking up Art as an accomplishment, and generally to foster public taste in the Arts and Crafts'.

In 1883/4 it was relocated from its Loch Promenade premises – now commemorated opposite courtesy of the Douglas Development Partnership's blue plaque-marked Knox Garden – to the purpose-built Kensington Road Art School.

This building, with its massive windows designed to allow natural light into the studio to aid its students, and the sole survivor in Douglas with a direct Knox connection, is – like so many government-

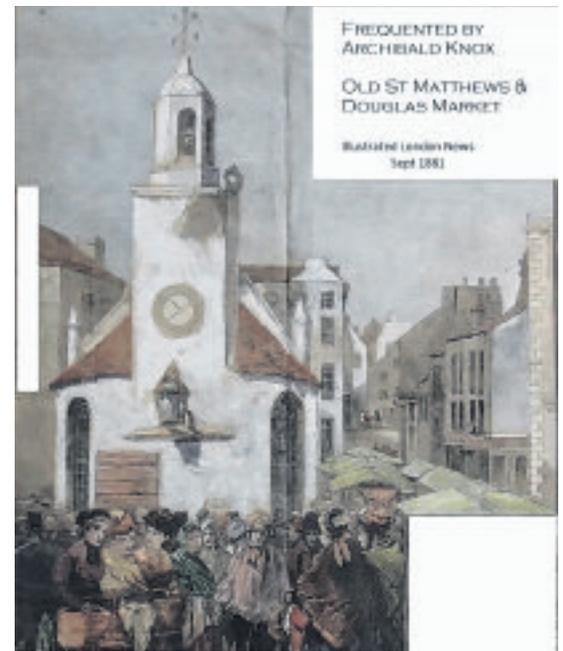
owned, architecturally important buildings – currently unprotected by registration.

With it now no longer being used for its original purpose, in passing it how many people would appreciate learning about its history?

Here Knox was to have for his contemporaries and possible mutual influences the architects Baillie-Scott, Robert Douglas and Frederick Swinnerton, and for his mentor Alfred Callister, whom he followed to London. According to 1880s newspapers, Knox's work was often judged 'excellent' in end-of-term assessments and he became a pupil teacher.

One account reads: 'Mr A Knox is represented by some clever drawings and is undoubtedly a promising student. Perhaps his productions would be more graceful if his touch was lighter' [they have to be darkened to be reproduced in the newspaper].

However, in open exhibitions held in St Thomas's schoolroom, Castle Street, it was a different story. Knox's images were there described as 'efficient', as against the 'charming picture of mountain and landscapes' produced by one of his female counterparts.



Old St Matthew's in Illustrated London News 1881



Archibald Knox opposite 70 Athol Street

At the same time, Knox taught drawing in several schools – such as Douglas High School for Boys in Derby Square. A report by the Higher Grade Sub-committee stated: 'In none of the schools under consideration (the private schools in town) is drawing taught in such a manner as would satisfy the requirements of the Science and Art Department for drawing in elementary schools.'

Unsurprisingly, this generated an angry response from Knox stating that the report's claim was false in that it included schools where drawing was taught by him.

He said it was 'false in so far as it means that the work done by me in these schools is not rightly and well done', and 'false and without authority wherever it pretends to include me and the work done under my direction'.

He added: 'No information of the nature of my work

and its results has ever been sought or obtained at these schools on the part of the sub-committee'. Knox was clearly known but not appreciated on his own island.

After several years of discourse with the authorities on the nature and quality of his teaching art, Knox applied for a grant to go to art school in London. He was refused!

However, he followed his mentor Callister south to establish his career as a designer, while still teaching at various colleges at Redhill in Surrey and in London.

His final Douglas connection, the family home at 70 Athol Street, was perhaps on the boundary of the 'contentious' top end of town and the 'supportive' lower town. It was the building he returned to and where, in 1933, he passed away. So, too, has the house – now demolished and replaced by a garden with the second blue plaque.



St Barnabas Square, Douglas