

## BUILDINGS AT RISK

# The Ward Library: the story behind a hidden gem in west

*Buildings at Risk looks not only at buildings lost or at risk, but also those that survive. This week Vicki Gillings, of Peel Heritage Trust, looks at Peel's little gem - the Ward Library in Castle Street. Philanthropically purpose-built as a library, it survives because it is still used and still loved.*

Peel is fortunate to have the first purpose-built public town library in the island, but it is one of those buildings that we pass by, or use and do not see, and it deserves another look.

Situated opposite the rear of the old courthouse which is now the Leece Museum, it sits in a conservation area in one of the oldest streets in the island.

Constructed in 1907, it was a philanthropic donation by JK Ward to the people of Peel.

James Kewley Ward (pictured below right) was born and raised in Peel. He emigrated to America and then to Canada where he became a wealthy 'lumber baron' and businessman.

He was, possibly because he was Manx rather than English or French, trusted by the citizens of his new home in Montreal, where he served as a Mayor and as a member of the Quebecois legislature.

JK Ward never forgot his homeland, and through his school-friend, later High Bailiff, Sam Harris, Mr Ward made a number of donations to good causes in the island, such as the hospital and the House of Industry.

Remembering Peel, he



Still serving upcoming generations - Orry Franklin, an avid reader

made a number of charitable donations and also, in 1871, donated a public clock to be

installed in St Peter's Church, Peel. The clock tower has recently undergone renovation by Peel Town Commissioners, with replacement clock faces being funded by public subscription.

In November 1905, Mr Ward offered the sum of £1,000 to build and equip a free lending library and reading room in Peel.

He wanted the library to be constructed in Castle Street at the site of his childhood home so that it would be available to all of the town.

However, his family home was being used for relief of the poor, administered by the church.

Finally, a local businessman, Mr Dale, offered 29 Castle Street as long as the building did not obstruct the windows of his net loft next door.

The library building was to include a general and a ladies-only reading room, and accommodation for the librarian.

In May 1906 Mr Ward gave another £400 when it was realised the building and fittings would cost more than origi-

nally thought.

There seems to have been a great deal of discussion about this offer by the Commissioners and Peel residents as they felt it would be a drain on the rates, despite Mr Ward endowing a house in Mount Pleasant, Douglas (I hope that somebody will tell me what happened to this endowment as it has never been a part of the Peel Town Commissioners' portfolio).

The town held a plebiscite of the ratepayers and eventually accepted this offer.

Nothing changes, today the same issues arise.

The Commissioners advertised an open competition on February 14 1907 with a £10 prize for the winning designer.

Sixteen architects' practices responded, from which the library committee selected

a design by Harry Cowle of James Cowle and sons, Douglas; Harry Cowle had previously designed the Peel railway station in a formal Arts and Craft style in 1905.

The winning design was a combination of the classical and vernacular 20th century styles.

CM Morris in the 1992 Peel Town Archaeological and Architectural assessment wrote 'the overall effect may not be one of scholastic correctness, but it was probably intended to evoke a rather charming piece of Edwardian eclecticism'.

Construction tenders were then invited, leading to a mention for Peel in the British Building News of March 1906 by a Mr Rainbow who commented 'Peel must be a happy place where labour is done for love and building materials grow by the roadside. It is encouraging to know that there

is a part in the Kingdom (sic) that has attained the simple life. The Town Commissioners seem confident they can get a library, caretaker's residence, a front boundary wall and railings all for £500.'

In the event, Mr Ambrose Kelly of Peel was the builder chosen at £537.

On September 6 1906 the foundation stone was laid by His Honour TH Kneen, Clerk of the Rolls.

In a cavity in the stone, a bottle time-capsule was sealed. This contained a document outlining the purpose of the building; copies of the island's newspapers; and a set of coins, one of each value, amounting to six shillings and four and one half-penny.

The library was constructed of local Glenfaba brick, Thomas Crane was the mason.

The cement rendering was scored to imitate ashlar work, and was always painted white or cream.

It was set back from the building line in Castle Street to facilitate the turning of carts and carriages.

There was an emphasis on healthy ventilation and heat-



Boyle's patent air-pump venturi ventilator, as originally fitted at the Ward Library





Current façade (Bill Quine)



Carefully-detailed front elevation, with imitation-ashlar lines



James Cowle & Sons' winning design



JK Ward's clock (Manxscenes.com)



Unchanged front entrance

ing. It was fitted with Boyle's air extractor system, one of the passive vents is still present. Stanley Cowell was the plumber, and the radiator heating was specially mentioned in the Manx Quarterly 1907 report of the opening. The coke boiler was in the basement and the lighting was by gas.

The furniture was made from white American oak by Mr Ambrose Kelly's furniture shop in Kirk Michael at the cost of £128. The two reading room tables were inlaid with brass but have disappeared within living memory.

The chairs are still in everyday use, two of them are used as computer chairs.

In the original reading room the ceiling is of vaulted design with exposed beams and rafters, lined with close boarding. Two beams are of particular interest as they are hand-carved curved arch beams presumably by Kellys of Kirk Michael. These beams sit on buttresses either side of the room and are integrated into the hand-carved gallow support.

The entrance and vestibule still have the original half-glazed wooden partitions, and the internal doors and

most door furniture are also original.

The lobby has Ruabon tiles laid in a herringbone pattern which originally extended over the ground floor.

On 26th September 1907 the opening of the library was attended by a host of dignitaries, many of whom gave very

long orations. His Honour TH Kneen opened the library using a large silver key. Mr TW Kermode, chairman of Peel Town Commissioners, then took possession of the building for the people of Peel.

The library initially operated as a reference library and news reading room due to cost limitations. The opening hours were 3pm to 9.30pm every day except Sunday. Many could not afford books and newspapers.

This was the internet of the day. The library still has the weekly Manx papers and plenty of skeet.

Daily and weekly newspapers were stocked and attached to reading desks. The librarian stood behind the very high counter, from which books were issued. This practice continued in living memory. Apparently women

were not allowed to take out thrillers and war books – only romances!

Initially it was used by adults, but in 1908 a Mrs Dodds of Patrick asked if her 13-year-old son could use the reading room.

Books and artifacts were donated to the library throughout its history. Peel-born Ann and Florence Crellin were librarians in Ohio who kept up Mr Ward's philanthropic tradition.

They subscribed to magazines for the Ward library, and sent more than 2,000 American books to Peel as well.

As a result, Carol Horton, the previous librarian, remembers Peel children thinking that America was full of Cowboys and Indians!

Others continue these donations, so cementing the position of the library in the community.

The library also contained natural history specimens – some readers may remember the now-missing narwhal tusk and stuffed pike.

Many of the other specimens were transferred to the Leece Museum.

Art works were also donated, some which still hang in the library. The fine clock was made by Peel clockmaker DW Kee.

The Manx author, scholar and cultural activist Sophia Morrison was a keen supporter of libraries; and in 1934 her family commissioned an oak bookcase for the Ward Library in Sophia's memory.

An excellent example of high-quality craftsmanship by Kellys of Kirk Michael, it has particularly fine carving by JD Kelly, father of Jack, who was 80 at the time.

There is a photograph of Sophia's cousin Miss K Morrison MBE next to a rather dapper Mr Jenkinson, chairman of the Town Commissioners and Mr HC Cowley who started the museum collection in the cabinet in the Library.

Continuing the philanthropic theme, in 1952 the Carnegie Trust funded an extension to the library to better house this bookcase and some of Sophia Morrison's Manx book collection.

The rear elevation was extended and the half-glazed wood partitions were removed from the reading room to open up the corridor and a doorway constructed in the rear wall.

In the 1960s further work was carried out to the librarian's accommodation, removing the corner staircase and turning the original first-floor ladies reading room into a bedroom.

The high counter was removed and a children's library created.

In 1989 there was a problem with the four rectangular leaded light windows in the front elevation leaking, and they were replaced by clear glazing.

In 2017 the upper front windows and rear upper windows were replaced by hardwood in the original pattern. Some cosmetic work was carried out on the first floor but this did not affect the original layout.

Apart from this work the building is intact and recognisable to the original design.

The library today is just as vibrant as it was when it first opened.

The Encyclopedia Britannica series languishes in the cupboard as the computers are in constant use – but books still rule the roost.

It has that distinctive library smell of books and polish with a bell on the door that rings every time someone comes in.

Buildings only live if people use them and the Ward Library is a fine example of a purpose-built building that is still being used as designed. Mr Ward and the Peel builders would recognise it today.

Do come in when you are passing, Gemma the librarian will be pleased to see you.



Drinking-water fountain outside the library



Sophia Morrison cabinet in the Carnegie-funded extension