

BUILDINGS AT RISK

The fiery fate of Ballabrooie and Mount Vernon houses

Our Buildings at Risk series covers buildings and structures – at risk, lost, and saved. Susan Temple continues our look at the grand houses on the former Ballabrooie estate, their occupants – variously talented, benevolent, and almost certainly murderous – and the apparent prevalence of ‘the fire microbe’.

In 1825 Philip Moore of Peel sold part of his estate of Ballabrooie, which he had inherited from his father and uncle, heirs of Sir George Moore.

The land was divided into 21 plots which were variously pieced together to form the plots of land on which seven mansion houses were built in the early to mid-part of the 19th century.

One such plot was purchased for £1,614 by Robert McGuffog, collector of customs for the Duke of Atholl. Mr McGuffog was clearly a remarkable man, the Mona's Herald describes how – by his abilities and good conduct – he was progressively raised from junior clerk at age 15 to the head of the customs department of this island, and was thus an exemplary example for the youth of the day.

Ballabrooie was built Mr McGuffog in 1829, at the same time as Mount Vernon by Doctor Joseph Curran, a retired physician, and Burleigh by Frank Vine, a noted yachtsman.

It was said that of the three mansions, Ballabrooie was the most pretentious in view of its castellated style of architecture, but not the most imposing.

By 1855, Ballabrooie was the property of a Colonel Charlton who came to the island after an active life, both civil and military, in India. He was said to be the possessor of considerable abilities ‘of a diverse character’ but devoted himself principally to natural



Ballabrooie's high castellated wall hid the row of stables, coach house and tack room in the stable yard behind. The stable was still in use up to the late 1960s by the late Marge Joughin. The stable buildings in the yard have been demolished to make way for a car park. A doorway in the tower provided access through to the tack room from the kitchen garden.

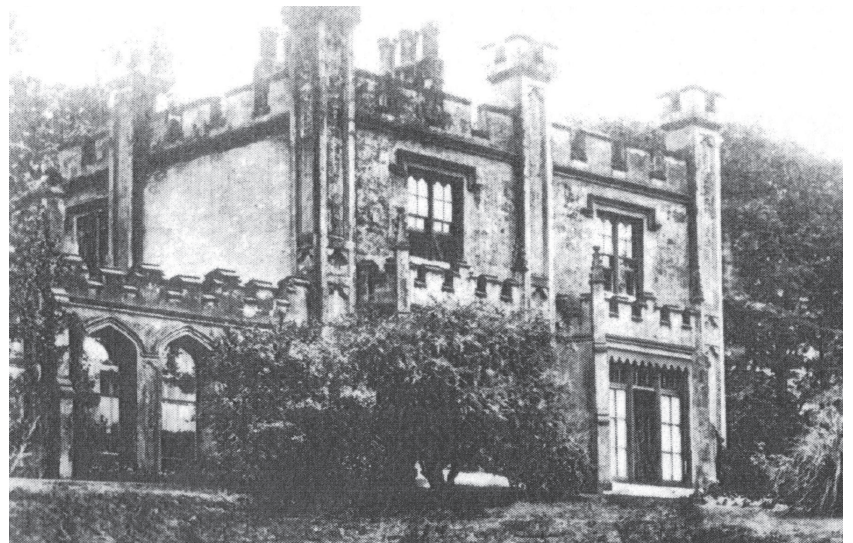


The original conservatory at Ballabrooie still in its ‘Gothick’ style matching the house when originally built. The whole building was converted into offices in the early 1970s and this formed the entrance to the basement office of JP Lomas and Partners which was created in what had been a large courtyard leading off the cellar kitchens to the house Photo: Peter Kelly

history and botany.

Because of this, in 1844 he was presented with a gold medal from the Horticultural

and Agricultural Society of Calcutta as ‘the first person to establish to the satisfaction of the Tea Committee that the



Ballabrooie as built in 1829, the most perfect example of a ‘Gothick’ house on the island. The walls were rendered in Roman Cement in the same way and colour as the parish church at Kirk Michael still is today. The design of Ballabrooie's frontage was copied a year later at Milntown in the north of the island. The gas explosion at Ballabrooie saw the loss of the turrets and castellation when it was reroofed

Photo: Peter Kelly

Tea Tree was indigenous in Assam’.

Great things have followed this discovery and now the cultivation of tea is one of India's most important enterprises. Colonel Charlton also added a conservatory to Ballabrooie. He died in October 1888, and in his will, he left £500 to the Isle of Man Hospital and £500 to the Isle of Man Industrial Home.

After Colonel Charlton's death, the property was sold to Mr George Drinkwater of Kirby Park and was tenanted in succession by Colonel Freeth (Chief Constable), Mr Horace Callow (advocate) and latterly in 1895 by ‘Mr Wyvill’, a Yorkshire gentleman, together with his wife, children and two servants. He furnished Ballabrooie ‘in a lavish style’ (on credit) and even borrowed a butter churn from the supplier, Mr Spence.

On Sunday, December 15, 1895 after lunch, hearing one of his children cry out, ‘Mr Wyvill’ went upstairs to investigate. He was on his way down with the child in his arms when a violent explosion occurred while he was passing a servant's bedroom, destroying the brick partition wall, which struck ‘Mr Wyvill’ on the face and arm injuring him.

Earlier in the week a plumber had been called to find the cause of a smell of gas, but had been unable to locate

it, however, it was afterwards said that a gas jet had been left burning in one of the servant's rooms which had ignited the build-up of gas from the leak.

The fire brigade were called but not only did the pump not work, but the only water available was from the domestic well. The fire brigade and onlookers – including the Lord Bishop and the Vicar of St George's – did their best by passing buckets hand to hand, but after two other water sources were drained (one of which was a cesspit) the house was devastated.

‘Mr Wyvill’ was treated by Dr Wood and Dr Matheson of the Douglas Hospital who noticed the remarkable resemblance to a certain Alfred John Monson, the defendant in the famous Ardlamont murder trial in 1893, and informed the Police. ‘Wyvill’ agreed that he was Alfred John Monson for whom an arrest

warrant was circulating, and after a period of surveillance, he was arrested and ultimately escorted to Leeds where he was to stand trial for perjury.

Alfred Monson had spent the previous 10 years opening a series of private coaching institutions, then absconding, having never paid rent, and having borrowed from everyone he could. He also had three ‘fires’ at one of his establishments.

He was employed as a tutor



Alfred John Monson, fraudster and probable murderer and arsonist



The full length castellated wall with the stable buildings behind, contrast with the pre-war houses in Ballabrooie Drive. In this picture the former kitchen garden has been cleared to make way for incongruous rustic brick town houses which now obscure the Victorian gem which is still there. At the time the Isle of Man Victorian Society asked for the houses to be set at right angles to the wall so as to form an open ended courtyard that meant the wall and turret would still be visible for the public but the planners thought otherwise

Photo: Peter Kelly

by the father of Cecil Hambrough, and rented by guile, the sporting estate of Ardlamont.



Ballabrooie now as offices



Looking from Peel Road at the approximate location of the former Mount Vernon

mont in Argyllshire for the shooting season.

At the murder trial, held in Glasgow, he was accused of trying to drown the non-swimmer Cecil by holing a rowing boat below the water line, and when that failed, of shooting his pupil, aged 20.

Cecil Hambrough had recently taken out two life insurance policies for £20,000 on his own life in the name of Mr Monson's wife Agnes. The verdict of 'not proven' was extremely controversial and due in a large part to the incompetence of the police and the ability of his brief.

In 1894 Madame Tussauds in London erected a waxwork of Monson at the entrance to its Chamber of Horrors, bearing a gun to which Monson took exception and sued the company, won, and was awarded one farthing in damages. This established the principle of 'libel by innuendo' which has been used to draw up defamation laws in many countries since.

In 1898 Monson appeared in court yet again and was sentenced to five years for fraud. Ballabrooie had been insured for £1,200 by Mr Drinkwater, but shortly after the fire, Monson submitted a claim to his insurers, the Royal Insurance Co. for jewellery and plate valued at £400 and furniture £2,000. This policy was taken out three weeks before the fire. Various repaired and

refurbished, Ballabrooie has been used as offices since the 1970s.

MOUNT VERNON

On October 3 1827, an advertisement appeared in the Manx Sun offering Mount Vernon House to let with between three and four acres of ground, including garden and orchard... 'the house and offices are amongst the first in the island for beauty and convenience, fit for a family with any fortune'.

The new occupier, and eventual owner, was Dr Joseph Curran, a physician, who came from Ireland with his wife Mary and two children, John and Mary and two servants Cathrin Finnigan and Charles Scott. They lived there until 1842 when they returned to Ireland and where Dr Curran died in 1857.

In 1855 Joseph Curran sold the house to James Bell, whose son, Robert sold the house to a Mr Earle of Manchester in 1874, who in turn sold it to Mr RK Quilliam.

It was during the ownership of Mr Quilliam that the disastrous fire took place which burned the house down to the ground, despite advances in communications and water supply.

The fire was first noticed at about 7.30pm on November 6 1897 by Mr CTC Callow who lived at Burleigh, adjoining Mount Vernon. He immedi-

ately telephoned the police station and went over to rouse the occupants of the house.

By the time he got there the fire had broken through the front windows and burned so quickly that it was only possible for people to save a portion of their effects.

For some time the house had been divided into tenements and there were five families living in rooms in the house.

The fire brigade arrived at about quarter past eight and a good supply of water was obtained in a few minutes from a hydrant at Ballabrooie.

The fire was under control by 11pm; Captain O'Hara, fire chief, said that he does not remember a fire that burned up so quickly. The house was a fine old place and the timbering was massive and all of pitch pine.

It was found impossible to put out the flames, and at 3am the brigade had to cut some of the slates off to enable them to get to the roof timbers which kept blazing afresh.

The blaze attracted a huge crowd of people, and was, at first, 'a most magnificent sight, the whole of the building resembling a huge furnace with flames leaping over the roof'.

However, the loss of the possessions sustained by the

MOUNT VERNON, &c.
TO BE LET,
MOUNT VERNON HOUSE. with between three and four Acres of Ground, including Garden and Orchard. The above Concern is situated on the Peel road, less than a mile from Douglas, opposite Pulrose. The House and Offices are amongst the first in the Island for beauty and convenience, fit for a Family with any fortune.
Also, to LET, a large convenient HOUSE, with Garden and Stable, immediately opposite the Bridge, on the South Quay, lately occupied by Richard Shaw, Esq.
Also, to be SOLD, about 20 Tons of Meadow and Rye-Grass HAY, of the first quality, at the lowest rate.
N.B.—Likewise a GIG as good as new, with Harness. Apply to Mr. LANE, or the Proprietor, Mr. J. CURRAN.
October 25, 1827.

Mount Vernon up for rent

Photo: iMuseum

GENTEEL & MODERN HOUSEHOLD FURNITURE.
HORSE, FAMILY CAR, HARNESS, &c.

TO be SOLD by AUCTION, by Mr. JOHN ARMSTRONG, on the Premises, MOUNT VERNON, Ballabrooie, on TUESDAY, the 19th Inst., and following day, all the Genteel and Modern HOUSEHOLD FURNITURE, the Property of Dr. CURRAN, who is leaving the Island,—consisting of Mahogany, Loo, Pembroke, and other Tables, Mahogany and other Chairs, Rosewood Sofa, Work Table, Handsome Brussels Carpets, new, Scotch and other Carpets, Fenders and Fire Irons, Chimney Glasses, &c. The Bed Room Furniture comprises 4 Post, French, and Camp Bedsteads, Feather Beds, Bolsters, and Pillows, Blankets, Washstands and Ware, Dressing Tables, Do., Glasses, Chests of Drawers, with all the useful Bed Room Requisites, 8-Day Clock. The Kitchen Articles are numerous, and very Superior. An excellent Mangle; Slipper and Shower Baths; Turning Lathe and Tools. Likewise a very useful Bay Horse, 6 years old, quiet and steady in harness; an excellent Family Car; Harness nearly new; Saddle and Bridle; Iron Plough; Timber in lots; a quantity of very good Manure.

Sale to commence each day at 11 o'Clock.

Sale of Mount Vernon contents when Dr Curran moved back to Ireland

Photo: iMuseum

poor tenants is a very heavy blow, and in the morning the grounds in front of the mansion were littered with the effects that were saved, looking as though the late occupants of the house had been having breakfast 'al fresco'.

It is rather cheerless camping out in November, especially in an east wind.

The women and children were housed for the night in some nearby buildings but some of the men were up all night helping to put out the fire.

The building was insured

for £1,400 with the Norwich Union Insurance Company, but the house was not rebuilt. In 1901, a lodge and some cottages on the main road were sold to Mr CTC Callow of Burleigh, for £1,100.

Subsequently, Mr Quilliam sold off most of the land for building in 78 lots.

In January 1899, following a disastrous fire which destroyed a full-sized replica of Nelson's ship on show at Belle Vue [see Buildings at Risk in Isle of Man Examiner, July 31 2018], the Examiner had the following 'comment': 'With

regard to this burning of the Victory, it is curious to reflect how prolific the neighbourhood has been in conflagrations during the last few years.

'There have been three fires of a destructive character at Belle View, Mr Monson (or Wyvill) formerly of Ardalmont and Ballabrooie, and not long ago Mount Vernon Mansion almost reduced to ashes.

'It is the fashion these days to ascribe most unpleasant things to the busy microbe.

Verily must the fire microbe flourish in the Douglas valley.'