

BUILDINGS AT RISK

Our built heritage: still at risk – a 100th edition special

Our Buildings at Risk series – which covers buildings and structures saved, lost and still at risk – reaches a milestone today, edition number 100, in which Frank Cowin and Dave Martin of the Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society reflect on the plight and vulnerability of the island's built heritage.

When this series of articles started we had no idea that we would be writing article number 100.

The title 'Buildings at Risk' was chosen because of the danger to the island's built heritage from the seeming dismissal of most of them by many, especially those in authority, as being of no interest, importance or value.

Much praise is heaped upon the value and beauty of the landscape and culture of the island without apparently recognising that it is the nature of the built environment that helps create it.

Some of these articles have naturally concentrated on individual buildings that are, or were, at immediate risk. Others, however, featured buildings that have been saved through appropriate repair, alterations and, in many cases, change of use.

Other articles have explored the history and stories associated with the buildings and the people who designed,



The ultimate form of building alteration

(Peter Hearsey, courtesy Manx Museum)

built, owned or occupied them.

Whilst the island might not have the vast Ducal Palaces that exist in some parts of the adjacent islands, or indeed the Georgian splendour of some of their cities, we do have a wealth of 'grand houses' and Victorian terraces which inspire the envy of many of our visitors.

They are particularly envious of our arts and crafts

buildings and of the vernacular 'architecture' displayed in the farms, cottages and industrial buildings throughout the island, and the way that character is so varied regionally.

The island's castles and archaeological remains and artefacts are, however, greatly appreciated within the island as well as across the world.

It seems ironic that the dismantling of the 'Manx Cottage' within the Manx Museum

created an outrage which well outweighed any objections to the destruction of so many original cottages in the countryside.

The island's legislature has always been very reluctant to afford proper protection to our built heritage. Indeed, at one time if a farmer wished to build a new farmhouse the planning permission would include a clause ordering the demolition of the existing house.

This went against the natural order of earlier times



Port Grenagh – a mill given longer life by a sensitive new use

where the original house would pass on to be occupied by a farm worker or, if unsuitable for this, to become a store or other farm building.

This meant that when going onto the farm street, the history of the place was there to be seen.

It was only in the 1970s that the government pulled together a group of interested people to make a suggested list of buildings to be protected.

It was a long time before any real attempt was made to create the necessary legislation and even then it was a very blunt instrument in that there was only one class of registration administered as if it was a planning application.

The idea of conservation areas was rejected entirely at

the time but was added much later. Most buildings on the original list were not processed for this, to become a store or other farm building. All this compares very badly with the protection given to ancient monuments in 1886.

In other jurisdictions, funding exists for repairs etc to listed buildings and within conservation areas.

Here, this was eventually provided for our registered buildings and conservation areas, but the regulations severely limited the amount available not only for one scheme but also for the lifetime of the building. However, no funds for this have been included in the budget for a number of years.

Alterations and additions



Balhane Cottage – lost due to failure in process, pre-emptively demolished even before planning permission application submitted for the roadway that may come through there



Kirk Michael Court House – becoming derelict through a dereliction of duty

risk



**POSSIBLE
NEW USE**

The former Nurses' Home – ripe for a new life as apartments?



**STILL
DISUSED**

Castle Mona – still deteriorating?

dictions.

The authorities have failed in their duties to monitor the condition of registered buildings to ensure their wellbeing. This is clearly seen in the case of Kirk Michael Courthouse, which featured in a previous Buildings at Risk article (in the IoM Examiner of February 14, 2017).

Part of the problem has been the lack of suitably qualified/knowledgeable staff, and even when such were in post, their secondment to other duties. This means that at many times no-one was available to

have been allowed to register buildings which would not have received approval to listed buildings in other juris-



**STILL
UNDER
THREAT**

The view of Castle Rushen and Golden Meadow Mill approaching from the north - under threat from blanket urbanisation



**SAVED BY
FARMERS**

The Deemster – saved by generations of farmers

advise anyone wishing to carry out work to older buildings.

The one bright spot in the otherwise dismal story of protection is that in the last few months the staffing situation has changed.

But this is countered by the changes made to interested party status which means that, while anyone can comment on a planning application, only the immediate neighbours, the local authority and Manx National Heritage can challenge the decision.

The recent pre-emptive demolition of Balthane Cottage in Ballasalla to give an

entrance/exit point for the proposed bypass has raised yet again the question of the need for approval for demolition.

In the island, notification of proposed demolition has to be given to building control and clearance obtained for demolition methods and the health and safety aspects of the work.

No planning permission is required though, unless the building to be demolished is registered, in a conservation area or attached to another building not being demolished.

It seems perverse that where permission is required to change the shape of a window or in some cases even the material of a window frame (although the latter is all too often ignored), that the ultimate form of alteration - demolition - should not require any permission at all.

This means that even if the building was on the list for possible registration, it can disappear or any requests for redevelopment which would imply demolition and replacement where approval includes conditions calling for a full record of the existing being

lodged. Or a bat survey called for under the Wildlife Acts can be frustrated or circumvented because demolition is not a planning matter and not controlled.

Only the tiniest proportion of our buildings will ever be registered - or indeed deserve to be registered - but all buildings have played their part in our heritage and deserve just a modicum of consideration before they're wantonly swept away with official support.

Otherwise, one day we'll wake up, as Agatha Christie said: 'And then there were none'.



AT RISK

Ballakilmartin

The Alliance for Building Conservation

The Alliance for Building Conservation (ABC) exists to bring together representatives from the island's heritage and conservation groups to discuss and act on matters of common concern.

The vision is to conserve our architectural heritage and make the Manx built environment as attractive as our outstanding landscape, benefiting residents, visitors, and the economy.

ABC recognises that the key to a building's longevity is continued usefulness and that its life may evolve, hence the emphasis on sustainable conservation rather than preservation.

Founded by the Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society, which was concerned at the continued neglect of the island's built heritage and lack of support for building conservation, ABC has brought together almost all the active heritage

trusts in the island.

These are Rushen, Castletown, Foxdale, Peel, Ballaugh, Laxey & Lonan, Onchan, Kirk Michael, Ramsey), IoM Victorian Society, Save Mann's Heritage, the IoM Steam Railway Supporters Association, and the Antiquarians (as coordinators/secretariat).

We have sought over the past four years, through these newspaper articles for which we thank the newspaper proprietors and staff, to highlight and promote aware-

ness of the plight of vulnerable buildings - it is very hard to persuade anyone to value what they don't know.

It is hoped that the articles help create awareness and an understanding that all buildings, from the grandest to the humblest, have a story to tell and a very important part to play in enhancing both our environment and our lives.

- More information on ABC can be found at www.ABC.org.im