

BUILDINGS AT RISK

Douglas Head – A conservation area?

Patricia Newton of the Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society delves into the history of one of the island's iconic tourist spots, Douglas Head.

Douglas Harbour provides a strategic maritime gateway to the island for visitors and returning residents.

Approaching the wide sweep of Douglas bay the promenades on one side contrast dramatically with rocky headland and quarried cliffs of Douglas Head.

Both views are impressive but in detail differ dramatically.

Both are important in giving first impressions of the island, how much it looks after its landscape, architecture and open space; how much they are allowed to complement one another.

Linked from 1876 by the unique horse tramway, historically the open promenades developed from the 1860s to 1890s with a mixture of 'terraces' of hotels, boarding houses and individual villas, many now replaced by apartment blocks. It is all a conservation area.



Douglas Head in 1993

South of the harbour the rocky headland with its strategically placed lighthouse gives way to grassy hillside, with a scattering of structures, apartment blocks and aeriels, on Head Road large individual properties and terraces and below the working image of tanks and sheds on South Quay. No conservation area is designated.

Should planning seek to redress the balance? Conservation areas are designated to encourage property owners, developers and planners to recognise the inherent characteristics of older areas and maintain these.

The balance of buildings to open space, the height of buildings, materials used, views into and out of the area are used in promoting, not stifling, quality development whether redevelopment, renovation, conversion or extension.

Individual older structures which are major players in the timeline of the locality are identified.

Is South Quay / Douglas Head worthy of conservation area designation? Based on a proposal submitted by David Wertheim and Charles Guard as part of the area plan for the

east inquiry, individual elements are examined.

Since the early 1960s, 4d ferry ride across the harbour ceased, looking over the Marina, a stroll via North Quay to the vacant, former sole watering hole south of it, The Trafalgar (BAR 101), anchored at the junction of South Quay and Fort Anne or Head Road gives a mixed impression.

Heading steeply uphill the significance of views over Douglas Harbour and North Quay from Head Road is apparent.

On its south side old quarries, source of local Manx slate building stone, are reutilised for 'warehouses' but their sheer faces still dominate behind.

Then come the terraces, on both sides of the road but frequently not blocking each other's view.

Taubmann Terrace on the south, the oldest, dating from 1829 is Georgian in style with deliberately blanked off 'windows' to achieve balanced design, some bay windows to steel a march on their neighbours and get views and light beyond them and small front gardens bounded by a mixture of railing styles and pillars.

Built in Bowling Green

Field uphill on the north side Fort William Terrace properties (the eastern part was Fort Anne Terrace) designed by local architect John Robinson have their 'back' doors to the roadside with their 1849 frontages dominating over the harbour.

Conservation area status would recognise the quality of the buildings and their plain Manx architecture, their response to their dominant situation and street frontage, and need to avoid breaking up the rhythm of their harbour frontage.

Uphill stone boundary walls broken only by castellated stone entrances herald a different style of development. Occasional glimpses through trees, many registered, or down a footpath are obtained of substantial hillside buildings protected from south westerlies.

Numbering RNLI founder Sir William Hilary amongst its owners, the 1790s Fort Anne built for Irishman 'Buck' Whaley and once an hotel advertising its 'breezy' (north-easterly) location had winged extensions.

Redeveloped, the white landmark building stands dominantly aloof when seen from the harbour approach.

Next is Ravenscliffe, allegedly one of the five original mansion houses in Douglas.

Designed in 1850 in tripartite Gothic style by John Robinson its owners included Rev Fred Cubbon, a philanthropist, and Rudolph Brailli whose Welsh-born mother married to his Austro-Hungarian father and fleet of ships supporting Britain in WWI led him to purchasing Knockaloe Moor after its WWI internment camp use rather than being held in it. He became an

entrepreneurial director of Island Industries and the Palace and Derycastle Company.

Next door the 1836 Manx baronial style Harold's Tower by John Welsh built by John Newton, who was instructed to spare no expense, for James Quirk was later lived in by John Martin artist of Plains of Heaven & Belshazzers Feast.

Its castellated hexagonal tower was originally a folly. Three sites, two of them registered, of great significance and well maintained with strong boundaries and a strong sense of place. And then a change, the wide open spaces of Douglas Head.



Edward VII letter box located on the Douglas Harbour swing bridge



The Camera Obscura is one of only four remaining in the British Isles



Harold's Tower was built in 1836

Gifted in 1871 to the people of Douglas for their benefit and enjoyment by Major John Senhouse Goldie Taubmann of the Nunnery but not before he had controversially built the John Robinson designed Douglas Head Hotel around the land mark look-out, 'herring' tower, thus ensuring himself of an income from the land.

The hotel remained in Taubmann ownership until 1971 when sold to Heron & Brearley and subsequently re-developed.

The importance of the lookout is diminished, the tower's bare stonework now painted white and almost indistinguishable from the surrounding complex. Below, the former HMS Valkyrie, a secret Royal Navy radar training station.

No protection here from the elements and frankly not much architectural pretence either for this altered building - Manx Radio Station!

Beside it, entertainment also derived earlier from the short-lived 1899-1900 150ft Warwick Tower revolving at the top, until it burnt down, and up to 1906 non-revolving shorter tower.

Conversion or partial re-development is an ongoing feature of several buildings and structures on the head. With its advertisement sign it's clear more is intended at the former Stanley House. But building footprints and thus their proportionality to open space have, and are being

retained - an appropriate Conservation Area criteria.

Amongst grassland and gorse are the characteristic network of paths, steps, and - more steps - linking small structures reminiscent of the historical past - features of importance in the context of the story of the Head, but frequently unprotected.

Near to Manx Radio - a small castellated building - a covered well perhaps? On the tower's other side a war memorial. The original Taub-



Warwick Tower on fire in 1906

mann-commissioned 1921 structure, a 28ft 6in high sandstone cross, weathered away and was replaced by the current one by Thomas Quayle.

Further over an amphitheatre originally reached by steps from Marine Drive attracted huge crowds - up to 1500 - to shows and services. Nearby a toboggan run had a steam engine giving rise to the concern, along with people smoking, that surrounding

gorse and ling might catch fire thus affecting the tiny stage sitting on top of a gunpowder magazine built into the hillside. On 16 July, 1887 Todhunter and Elliot were given 36 hours to remove the 10 tons of powder, the building to be no more used as a magazine but the exterior walls to be left to the Commissioners to use as they think fit. Beyond, the arched Marine Drive entrance to the former tramway continues the castellated theme.

Contemporaneously a camera obscura had been built on this side of the hotel. Opened in May 1887 and operated by Mr Hicks, it burnt down later that year. On a different site, the current Great Union Camera Obscura, one of only four remaining in the British Isles, is J. Fielding's replacement.

Uniquely constructed with 12, now 11, lenses, not a single tilting table, its views are a different sort.

'Pictures true to nature', only males originally were permitted to bathe at Port Skillen's 1874 open-air baths. 'There can be no getting away from the fact that nowadays a very great deal can be seen for sixpence; indeed everyone excepting the commissioner's official can on Douglas Head see a very great deal for nothing!' Courting couples on the hillside might be espied along with busy steamers in Douglas Harbour.

Bought by the Heaton family in 1906 and acquired and renovated by Government



Former Douglas Harbour Swing Bridge control tower, which was built in 1895

in the 1990s its long run is continued by the voluntary manning of the Isle of Man Victorian Society.

Perhaps summarising the character of Douglas Head, an 1887 proposed lift from near Port Skillen was said to not improve the appearance of the place in any way. 'Nobody asks for this structure except for the individuals who expect to derive a profit from it.

'It is a very unfortunate thing if we are giving power to individuals to destroy what is one of the most beautiful and pleasant walks in.

'We ought not to have Douglas Head covered up so much that we cannot see it.'

Traceable now only by a track beside a castellated wall, the inclined railway, opened in 1899/1900 by Richard Maltby Broadbent, was an immensely popular alternative to 115

steps. It deserves recognition. Towards its harbourside base was a two gun battery, giving it's a name to the pier below. Its curved walls remain - but only just visible.

Extension of South Quay was itself a matter of debate over the rights of householders above with long gardens, private accesses to the water's edge and a jetty.

But it lent itself to construction of the lifeboat house, quays and breakwaters important to the growth of Douglas outer and inner harbours and now marina.

Beside the final 93 steps to the former gasometer, overlooking all with its deteriorating Douglas Harbour commissioner's date stone and Edward VII post box, stands the retired Swing Bridge Control Tower, a registered building.

Built in 1895 by Sir W. G. Armstrong-Mitchell and Co Ltd of Newcastle it operated the 450 tons bridge under hydraulic water pressure. With

brownfield sites on its west-ern flank what is its future?

Conservation area status would hopefully ensure that a non-dwarfing development is planned, possibly linking to its high rear door enabling visitor access to see the controls and view of Douglas Harbour.

Beyond, herring houses, Holmes brewery and bank and engineering works recorded in Taggart's 1833 busy Plan have been replaced by industrial units. In turn consent exists for replacing these by apartment blocks. Sadly in the context of the importance of views to and from a Conservation Area these will be higher than the Head Road behind.

With so many brownfield sites in the vicinity Government needs a Conservation Area plan for South Quay and Douglas Head to guide development. Despite its statutory responsibilities, Government does not even have an officer appointed to undertake this role.



Castellated covered walls of Douglas Head



The HMS Valkyrie radar building is now the home of Manx Radio



South Quay in November 1947