

## BUILDINGS AT RISK

# Cosy Nook has a special place in port's history

Our Buildings at Risk series covers buildings and structures at risk, lost, and saved. This week **James Maddrell** looks at an iconic Port Erin building and the landscape surrounding it. Both are under threat and both are key parts of what an independent report characterised as: 'The very attractive early fishing village along the seafront'.

**W**ell here we are again - yet another Manx cottage is potentially destined for the chop. It has to be said the Cosy Nook was never intended as a café - more a dwelling for fishermen and their families - but it has served its purpose as a café well for over a century.

The cottage is now in need of a little bit of TLC and imagination to once again make it fit for purpose.

Demolition of such original Manx cottages - when they can have a sustainable life - should be the last thing on anyone's mind especially a branch of local government who should be setting some sort of example.

In 2009 the government (Department of Local Government and the Environment) commissioned an independent report by AOC Archaeology and Costain Heritage, ahead of creating a conservation area in Port Erin. The report confirmed the need for one (duly acknowledged in the Southern Area Plan adopted by Tynwald in 2013).

Eleven years after the report, and seven years after adopting the Southern Area Plan, nothing has been done to implement the Port Erin conservation area (nor any of the others in that plan).

As well as identifying that, 'A number of buildings in the area should be registered. These are: Milner's Tower,

Falcon's Nest Hotel, Railway station, Collinson's Café, the report made the following observations regarding a conservation area in Port Erin:

'Positive buildings in the area should be used as exemplars for future design in the area, and any planning applications for their demolition should be carefully considered whilst being mindful of the current planning policy toward the retention of buildings of merit within a conservation area.

'Positive buildings identified within the conservation area appraisal are: Grosvenor Hotel, York House, Gleneagles, Regent House, the Stanley and Aalin, Promenade; the Marine Biological Station, Old Lifeboat Station, the Herdman Institute and the Bay Hotel, Shore Road; the Railway station; Collinson's Café; Athol Park and Glen View Terrace; Primrose Cottage, St Mary's Road; Cosy Nook Café, Shore Cottage, Surfside, Condor House and Edmund and Margaret Christian cottage on Shore Road; Sycamore, Strand Road and the old police station.'

**I**n reviewing these lists 11 years on it makes pretty depressing reading. Only the railway station is registered and that certainly was not at the behest of neither Port Erin Commissioners or the government. They have done nothing to register any

of the buildings suggested, and despite the report a significant number of the other buildings identified in the report have been allowed to be demolished or allowed to be neglected until they are lost - or they are about to be demolished without complaint. Indeed the commissioners are now hoping to join in themselves - demolishing the Cosy Nook which independent professionals have identified as a 'positive building' and an 'exemplar' for the port; and despoiling what the independent report characterised as 'The very attractive early fishing village along the seafront'.

The Cosy Nook café occupies a pair of cottages of traditional construction, almost certainly originally thatched.

The first cottage is believed to have been built and occupied by a Watt family, prior to 1840, with a second semi-detached cottage added to the seaward gable prior to 1877, hence it being referred to as 'the Watts cottages' in deeds up until 1930; although in the 1891 census, Phillip Watt, and Jane Watt (Phillip's spinster sister?) living next door, proudly described the semi-detached cottages as 'Watts Terrace'!

Careful study of a whole series of deeds in the Manx Museum archives and the registry indicates that the Watt(s) family, whose menfolk were fishermen, may have remained as sitting tenants even as the ownership changed a



The Cosy Nook, at the heart of Tourism Department advertising in 1990



'On the beach' - an early souvenir photograph, bathing vans and the Cosy Nook in the background

number of times in the 1800s. William Milner was the owner from 1861, presumably in the early days as a 'buy-to-let investment'.

In 1888 George Lucas Trustrum, of the Falcon's Nest Trustrum dynasty (see Buildings at Risk February 25, 2020), bought various land in that area. In 1889, Porter's directory lists five sets of refreshment rooms on 'The Shore', and advertisements for the Falcon's Nest promote the beach and 'Bathing Vans'. In 1891, GL Trustrum bought the two cottages from John Watts and his wife Anne, and it

is almost certainly during his ownership that the café, now known as the Cosy Nook, was opened. GL Trustrum owned them for 40 years, only selling Watts Cottages/the Cosy Nook to Port Erin Commissioners in 1930.

In 1928, Mr and Mrs Pearson started running the café, having moved from running one at Glen Helen. Mr Pearson died in an accident in 1934 - he was a general haulier and a café proprietor and was overcome by carbon monoxide parking his lorry in the garage. Mrs Pearson carried on running the Cosy Nook seem-

ingly fairly uneventfully apart from the odd run-in with Port Erin Commissioners. One such event was the commissioners taking offence at Mrs Pearson's 'unsightly hoardings'; the clerk was ordered to write to the occupiers of Cosy Nook and Beach Café stating that the commissioners were concerned about advertising on the commissioners' owned property, presumably taking umbrage at the big painted signs on the roofs of both.

As this was in 1939 by September 3, other more important events may have put 'unsightly hoardings' on



View from the west – the second cottage added to the seaward gable in the 1800s can be clearly seen in this 1930s photograph

Ballahane collection



View across Port Erin Bay' painted 1937 by William Hoggatt, with the Cosy Nook at its centre

Manx Museum art collection 7549

the back burner. Mrs Pearson continued to run the Cosy Nook until the early 1960s. Numerous tenants have made a living out of the Cosy Nook since Mrs Pearson, the most recent and hopefully not the last were Phil and Sue Maltby who were tenants from 2004 until 2017.

**S**o why is it important that the Cosy Nook stays? Well, this cottage has transcended all the modern phases Port Erin has gone through. To date it has been a fishing cottage then a café for the tourist industry and now it could be a pleasant place to go at weekends or evenings for the dormitory town that Port Erin has turned itself into. The village developed with the coming of the railway and tourism; much of fishing Port Erin was swept

away by tourist Port Erin. The cottages are some of the few survivors of fishing Port Erin and as such should be retained as part of the original fishing village. The cottage is an iconic building in Port Erin and sits serenely in countless photographs of Port Erin taken by people like Louis Taggart. It was a popular scene for artists, then and now, for example William Hoggatt's 'View across the bay' which was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1939.

The building would seem to have suffered from no

investment and very little maintenance for a long period of time. Structural reports still point to good walls albeit needing a new roof. Damp is bound to be an issue until modern linings are used (no one is advocating that the lath and plaster walls must be retained) and the building is heated once again - this is more or less admitted in the planning application.

So what could a little imagination create? How about open plan, no upper floors or maybe possibly just a partial mezza-

nine floor? With an open-plan working kitchen area visible to the eating area – similar to the way the booking hall at Douglas railway station was given a new, sustainable, life with a sympathetic partial mezzanine to operate as Greens restaurant in 1991.

And add a decent extension to the rear, something sympathetic like a high-quality conservatory or modern-build glazed area de-marking old from new, this would be unlike the grotesque lump currently added onto the front.

Criticism is often levelled at groups such as the Alliance for Building Conservation (ABC) for wanting to save buildings such as the Cosy Nook 'don't like change', 'need to modernise' are readily used statements. This patently is not true. If Port Erin Commissioners had wished to demolish the beachcomber café as



William Hoggatt painting on the beach in front of the Cosy Nook and leading light

iMuseum



'Port Erin from Strován's Hill' - an 1877 pencil sketch by Arthur Henderson, clearly showing the pair of Watts' cottages

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Busy Port Erin Beach

iMuseum

an example, I suspect very few people would mourn the loss. Groups such as ABC want to conserve the island's built heritage where it is practical, and promote new uses for buildings and protect them for future generations to enjoy. Buildings such as the Cosy Nook need protecting from unenlightened actions taken now.

The recent news the railway structures at Glen Moaar, Glen Wyllin and Ballaleece are possibly to be rebuilt at a cost of £1.3 million, albeit not for trains, are examples of short-sighted actions taken in the past being put right but at a cost vastly outweighing money collected by a foolish scrap drive in the 1970s.

Port Erin Commissioners are proposing to destroy an

asset which belongs to the people of Port Erin. The local ratepayers should be questioning the sense and viability of the project as currently proposed.

Detailed costings should be given for refurbishment and replacement of the building. Trip Advisor reviews make for interesting reading and don't place the commissioners in a very good light. It would appear that most visitors appreciate what we have better than some of us do which is sad indictment on us locals.

There are countless dining experiences in the UK such as Pothdinllaen on the Llyn Pern insula in North Wales, and far beyond, which are close to the beach and coping very well in nice quaint buildings – in fact, believe it or not, it's a selling point!

● In a statement released on July 8, Rushen Heritage Trust revealed the results of a 10-day survey they conducted across both Port Erin and wider; the issue was of such importance they had 879 responses.

Across all respondents, 63% were against the Commissioners' proposals with only 33% in favour. Of 325 Port Erin residents who responded, the opposition was even stronger with 68% against the Commissioners' proposals, and only 28% in favour. As a result of this survey, Rushen Heritage Trust say they will be registering an objection to the Commissioners' plans, and recommend that the Commissioners convene a public meeting to discuss the proposals and hear ratepayers' views.