BUILDINGS AT RISK

Guarding the coast

The Buildings at Risk series covers buildings currently at risk, buildings lost and buildings which have found new uses and new lives. Following the feature on Lifeboat stations last time, this week ***Dave Martin*** *- himself a former auxiliary coastguard - looks at the history of the coastguard in the island and some of their station buildings*

Our 'sea-girt isle' has a coastline some 100 miles long, which – in conjunction with Manannan's cloak – has both helped defend the island and also proved perilous for those 'who ply the waters upon their lawful occasions'.

Over the centuries, the work of guarding our coast has spanned both defending the people of the island, the revenue of various governments, and saving life.

Whilst vessels have been wrecked on the Manx coast since time immemorial, watching the coast began as a defensive measure.

No doubt local communities kept their own lookouts initially, but watching the coast became organised at an insular level, principally to raise the alarm in case of raiders or invaders.

In 1417, the Deemsters proclaimed in the 'Lex Scripta' the duty to keep watch and ward and the penalties for failing to attend – a sheep for the first missed duty, a cow for the second and forfeiting life and limb for a third offence!

A 1627 document in the Castle Rushen papers tabulates the names of the wardens responsible for organising the day and night watches in each parish, in some ways these were the predecessors of the Captains of the Parish.

Few of the exact locations are known, but some survive as names, such as Cronk-y-Watch near the Chasms.

The 1627 table records that Ffinlo Martin (one of my ancestors) was warden of both day and night watch for the parish of Kirk Andreas, at what they described as 'Sonday Hill' (Sunday Hill has been suggested as one of the translations for Knock-e-Dhooney).

Watch and ward persisted into the 18th century; but in the adjacent islands, other than in times of war, the main emphasis was on the preventative, or customs, or excise service – as typified by the one-time role of Scottish poet Rabbie (Robert) Burns - watching for those smuggling goods into the United Kingdom.

However, given the island's free-trade and modest local duties, this aspect did not greatly concern the insular authorities, until the Act of Revestment in 1765.

During the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the emphasis on watching the coast was for customs purpose, but as awareness of the loss of life on the British coasts grew, the emphasis gradually moved to protection of life as well.

Peel Signal Station Photo: iMuseum

Thomas Corlett, Officer in charge of the Ramsey Volunteer Life Corps. He is leaning on the sheer-legs used to raise the jackstay, to the right of the picture is a breeches-buoy, lower right is a hand-throwing line, lower left is a coiled jackstay and an anchor, beneath the sheer-legs are a cork lifejacket and the traveller block and whips, while in the background is the cart used to transport the rockets and all this equipment to the rescue site (iMuseum)

THE COAST GUARD SERVICE

In 1809 the British Government established the Preventative Water Guard to continue the fight against smugglers and also to protect shipwrecks, safeguarding cargoes and vessels from looters.

In 1822 the preventative services were consolidated under the Board of Customs and christened the Coast Guard (contracted to just Coastguard in the 20th century).

Often manned by ex-naval men, the Coast Guard increasingly became seen as a coastal defence force, and in 1856 the Coast Guard came under admiralty control for whom they provided a network of signalling and reporting stations.

At that time, pre-radio, vessels out at sea could only communicate by visual signals, so signal stations were established ashore to relay such visual signals onward by telegraph.

As well as passing routine signals, those Admiralty Signal Stations would also report any distress signals seen to the local lifeboat station, and if necessary the local Rocket Brigade, for whom they sometimes also provided 'the gunner'.

During the 1914-18 Great War, those signal stations took on a much greater role, and were augmented by watch kept from other suitable vantage points.

A century after it was founded, in 1923 the Coast Guard was placed under the Board of Trade and dedicated to life saving, salvage from wreck and administration of the foreshore.

RESCUE EQUIPMENT

At first, rescue by the Life Saving Corps involved getting a rope from the wreck to the shore.

If close enough, a weighted heaving-line could be thrown, otherwise it depended on either one of the survivors swimming ashore, or a volunteer swimming out to the wreck.

A heavy, sodden rope would impede the swimmer so, much in the way a sailor will throw a heaving-line ashore when mooring, the swimmer would take the lightest line possible out with them, and then pulling increasingly heavier 'messenger' line(s) and then the ropes to be used for the actual rescue.

Survivors would then pull themselves hand-over-hand shoreward along that rope. This gave a chance for able-bodied survivors to save themselves, but did little to help anyone more vulnerable who needed rescue.

The next step was to use a ship's lifebelt with two ropes so it could be pulled to and fro with a survivor floating in the lifebelt. In order to stop the survivor slipping out of the lifebuoy, it was fitted with a canvas seat with holes for the legs, hence being known as the 'breeches buoy'.

Then, it became common to suspend the breeches buoy from a higher taut

Castletown Rocket House, to which volunteers were summoned by ringing the bell. Now sympathetically converted to a dwelling Photo: Ed Moore

The former lookout at Gob Gorrym / Blue Point (always known by the English coastguard as Rue Point) – main lookout derelict, but WWII protected observation point still defying the weather and vandals

Castletown (Scarlett Point) lookout, now used by radio hams

Ramsey Coast Rescue Equipment store above and station (below) are both now in new uses as offices and yacht club respectively

rope (the 'jackstay') – at the casualty end, the jackstay would be secured to the highest point on the mast, while on shore the jackstay would be elevated using a tripod sheer-legs.

One of the final developments of this rig was the use of an endless 'whip' via a pulley block which was sent out to the casualty, somewhat like the halyards on a flag-pole which allowed a flag to be pulled both up and down while standing on the ground.

This meant most of the work of hauling-out as well as all the hauling back in could all be done by the shore team, rather than wave-swept casualties.

This all depended on getting at least one rope between the shore and the casualty vessel, difficult enough in calm weather, but much harder in stormy weather.

The first powered line-throwing apparatus deployed in any significant numbers on the coast, starting in 1810, was the 'Manby Mortar' – a squat, heavy canon.

A special cannon-ball with an eyelet cast in it was used, which when fired – if the line didn't snap – dragged the line hopefully over or within reach of the casualty.

By 1825, frustration was growing with the Manby mortar – its weight, its accuracy, and the number of times the line would part.

Rockets were increasingly well known in the western world, so experiments were made with Boxer-style rockets, like a giant firework rocket on a long stick, Following trials in 1827 with John Dennett's version of a Congreve rocket, the UK Board of Trade decided that the rocket apparatus provided a worthwhile means of rescue for those stranded on the coast, and commenced establishing teams to use Board of Trade supplied equipment.

Known variously as Volunteer Life Corps, or Life-saving Corps, they were colloquially known by many as 'The Rocket Brigade'.

MANX COAST GUARD STATIONS

Coast Guards first appeared in the island in their preventative role after revestment and Life Saving Corps were established mid-19th century.

For example, Ramsey's Rocket Brigade was established in June 1886 and some stations, such as Castletown and Peel had dedicated 'rocket houses'.

Ramsey housing station and (inset) EIIR plaque

Concurrently, in the island three Admiralty Signal Stations were established – at Cranstal, at Spanish Head (near Cronk-y-Watch, the former watch-and-ward site) and on Peel Hill.

In a legacy from the days when Customs Officers were regularly rotated to distant stations in case they became too friendly with the locals, right up until the late 20th century Coast Guard officers only served limited terms at each station, which meant the Coast Guard service provided accommodation.

Some of the earliest which still stands are the three Coast Guard cottages at Knockaloe Beg for those who manned the Peel Hill signal station and lookout.

In Ramsey, the Coast Guards' quarters were in Gladstone Avenue, but in 1953 a new housing station, complete with training room, was erected at the junction of Park Road and Premier Road, facing the Mooragh Park, on the old WWII internment camp parade ground.

During WWII, there was a great expansion of lookout to the scale of Watch of Ward centuries before. In fact 17 lookouts were established in locations as diverse as the end of the Queen's Pier in Ramsey and a radio-equipped party on the Calf of Man.

Wartime, with the extinguishing of lighthouses, also brought increased hazards for seafarers and contributed to tragedies such as the wreck of the Fleetwood deep-sea trawler 'Merisia' at Bulgham which, despite over 12 hours struggle by the Ramsey Rocket Brigade, no one was saved.

Also a casualty of the 'blackout' was the passenger ferry 'Ulster Queen' which grounded on rocks near Port-e-Vullen. 93 passengers were transferred by boats to another ferry, but after this the weather worsened and Ramsey Rocket Brigade rescued the remaining 44 by breeches buoy.

The island has five coast rescue teams – Ramsey, Douglas, Castletown, Port Erin and Peel.

Rocket firing and breeches buoy training took place across harbours (such as at Peel) or on dedicated drill grounds such as at Langness for the Castletown team, or on the Ayres for the Ramsey team.

If anyone ever wondered why there was a lonely 'electric' or 'telegraph' pole in the middle of the Smeale Ayres, it was a 'wreck post', a dummy mast towards which rockets would be fired and to which the 'wreck party' would secure the outboard end of the jackstay.

In the early 1980s, partly because of increased use of radio at sea, HM Coastguard reduced and then discontinued visual watch from fixed locations.

This meant the closure of auxiliary stations such as those Blue Point, Cornaa, Douglas, Castletown, Bradda and Peel.

It also meant that the local headquarters at Ramsey no longer had a lookout – it became 'an ops room with a sea view'.

Also, with motorisation allowing greater assistance from flank stations, the teams became more focused. For example Port Erin team started to focus on cliff rescues.

In 1988 HM Coastguard closed the Ramsey station and announced that following 120 years of operation in the island its services would now be provided from stations in neighbouring England.

The Isle of Man Government responded by establishing its own coastguard service, which began operating in 1989.

Co-ordinated from the Marine Operations Centre in the Sea Terminal, volunteer Coastguard rescue officers from the five teams around the island continue to help save lives.