

## BUILDINGS AT RISK

# Pier to pier - from staycation blog to the Sea Terminal

*Buildings at Risk looks at our built heritage around the island, and how buildings and structures can evolve with changing circumstances.*

*This week Frank Cowin of the Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society looks at the early history of what would eventually become the Sea Terminal, starting with a 'staycation blog' from the 1790s.*

In 1791 David Robertson, who had previously been in the Revenue Service in and around the Isle of Man, decided to visit and fully explore the island.

This was no doubt due to the usual Continental Grand Tour not being available as a result of the growing troubles associated with the French Revolution and fear of war with the continental powers.

Many would-be travellers had instead turned to touring 'the Highlands and islands', playing a part in the Isle of Man becoming a holiday destination. A number of these like Robertson wrote accounts of their visits so encouraging others to follow them.

He used his contacts and arrived on board a revenue cutter which on the way to the island captured - off Maughold Head - a smuggling boat owned by a Cumbrian.

Robertson writes of Douglas Bay as being a safe haven except from storms from the east. He writes that 'the entrance of the harbour is narrow and dangerous, being fenced on each side by a range of precipices.'

'In the centre of these a lighthouse, at once useful and



Pictured above, the 'triangle building' soon after it opened in 1890

ornamental, formerly stood. This, with a great part of the key, was destroyed by a severe storm in 1786; and in this ruinous state, highly injurious to the public and fatal to many individuals, it has remained ever since'.

He goes on to talk about the 'the various shipwrecks this has occasioned' and then describes the wreck of the fishing fleet having been in Douglas himself when it happened in September 1787.

Robertson describes how a slender post supporting a small lantern had been fixed to the ruins of the lighthouse. The light was knocked down by the first boat attempting to enter, and the consequences were dreadful.

He gives a vivid picture of the scene ending with 'When morning came, it presented an awful spectacle! The beach and rocks covered with

wrecks; and a group of dead bodies floating in the harbour'.

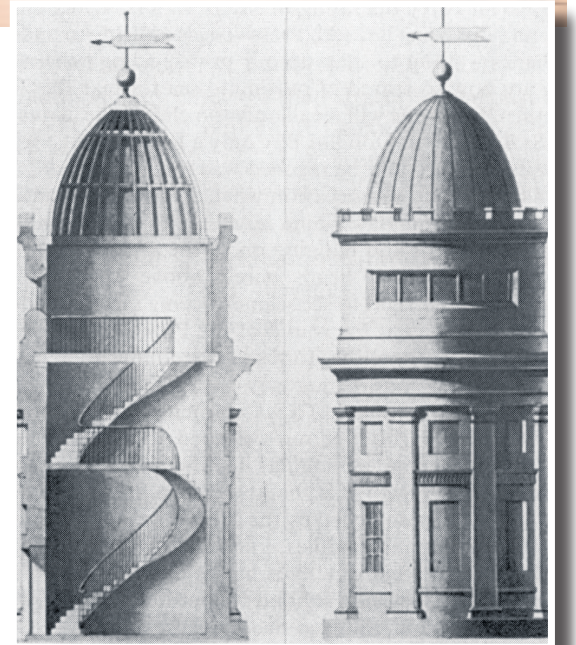
Robertson then laments that the harbour remained in the same ruinous state and was a monument of reproach to government. His book was published in 1794 and just before publication he added a note to say 'a scheme was planned and he hoped it will be executed in the ensuing summer'.

It was, however, 1801 before a new pier - known as the Red Pier because of the red St Bees sandstone used in its construction - was completed. It was designed by George Steuart, the architect responsible for the Castle Mona, and included a very decorative pierhead lighthouse (Buildings at Risk, Isle of Man Examiner, November 17, 2020).

The land at the head of Circus Beach - that is between the Red Pier and the Pollock Rocks on which the Douglas town fort stood - had been at the instigation of the Duke of Atholl used as the builders' yard while the pier works were in progress.

When the work was completed, instead of the land being returned to public use the Duke decided it was prime building land for new residences. The letter of complaint written by Kermott Stowell to the authorities in London suggests that fishermen wanted to resume using Circus Beach to launch and haul out their boats.

The Douglas Fort, as it then survived, was one of those constructed for the Earl of Derby about 1540 and designed like Peel Battery and the Derby Fort on St Michael's Isle by Stefan von Haschep-



(Above) George Steuart's elegant design for the harbour light at the head of the Red Pier  
Courtesy of the Manx Museum



Douglas Pier - and the original light - as recorded by Daniel Robertson



The Red Pier in 1860, and the remaining Douglas Fort walls, soon to be swept away when the Victoria Pier was built. Also note the lack of promenades and major northbound roadway  
Photo: iMuseum



Promenading on the Red Pier, from where you could also pay to be rowed across the harbour

berg, otherwise known as 'Stephen the German' (BAR, February 11, 2020).

It was for a long time used as a 'Watch and Ward point' and as the 'black hole' (prison cell) for the town until most of it, bar a circular rampart, was demolished in 1818. Popular story, however, claims it dates back to the Roman era and was used as a refuge by a brother of Queen Boadicea.

The Red Pier served for many years both in its harbourage capacity and also as a 'showing off' venue for the well-to-do to promenade along in their finery, with strict controls being imposed on what you could wear on your feet so as not to damage the fine sand-

stone paving!

The Abernethy breakwaters described in a previous article (BAR, November 3, 2020) were built in an attempt to encourage the increasing numbers of steam ships carrying passengers around the Irish Sea to visit the Isle of Man.

Work on the first Douglas Breakwater started in 1862 with the construction of a road along the south side of the harbour to a point below the Douglas Head gun battery. The Abernethy Breakwater was swept away in a storm in May 1864.

The Red Pier had been built in 1801 prior to the Steam Packet Company being found-

ed in 1831, and visitor numbers started to grow.

Although visitors were arriving, Governor H.B. Loch realised that, as ships could only come alongside the pier at high water, passengers had to be ferried ashore in rowing boats at all other states of the tide.

As a result Tynwald, of which the governor was effectively the finance minister and controlled all spending, gave approval for the destroyed Douglas breakwater to be replaced. Not only with a 'solid' breakwater which ships could berth alongside, but that a new pier should be built out from the Pollock Rocks, the site of the Douglas Fort, most



Seaward end of the triangle building with 'Dawsey' Kewley's memorial water fountain in foreground and the door to the Telegraph office under the 1890 date on the balustrade

of which had been demolished in 1818 although a circular rampart remnant can still be seen in photographs of circa 1860.

The new pier was to be parallel to the Red Pier and provide berthage at all states of the tide. Although it was initially proposed it should be named after the governor himself, he insisted it should instead be named after Queen Victoria and the Victoria Pier was duly opened on July 1, 1872.

It was realised that access to and from the proposed new pier would be very difficult because of the maze of narrow streets which made up the main part of Old Douglas.

Consequently, at the same time a new road – to be known as Victoria Street – was pushed through the maze to join up with the then still relatively new Prospect Hill leading to Upper Douglas.

At the same time, work was put in hand to reclaim land from the sea which could be used to site new boarding houses and hotels and to clear the route to the north.

This created a 'parade' to be named after the governor and would start at the foot of the new pier and at the other end join up with the Colonel's Walk or Harris Promenade which had been privately built but then handed over to the town.

The first blocks for the seawall were laid on June 24, 1874 and the last on October 21, 1875 and all the new building plots had been sold by 1880.

If only we could keep up with that today!

In May 1879, the Post Office made an agreement with the Isle of Man Steam Packet Company to carry the mail to and from the island and there would be boats to do this on six days a week.

More boats and more boarding houses led to more visitors and more berths required for the boats so a scheme to extend the Victoria Pier started in 1887. Over time, the pier was widened and more land reclaimed at the landward end.

**A**s passenger numbers had increased, so had the complaints about lack of shelter especially during rain and storms.

The result was the 'triangle' building, complete with ornamental clock tower, on part of the reclaimed land at the foot of the pier period.

Built in a mixture of brick and sandstone, a central waiting room was surrounded by toilets, shops and restaurants, left luggage office and facing

the pier a telegraph office with the balustrade above carrying the date 1890.

Directly in front of this became the site chosen for the granite monument to David 'Dawsey' Kewley who died in March 1904. The monument memorialised his saving of 40 or more lives from drowning in and around the harbour.

It served as a drinking fountain and water source for horses and other animals in the area. Now in a modified form it is in the nearest of the sunken gardens on Loch Promenade near to the lifeboat/Sir William Hillary memorial.

A severe storm in August 1905 brought more complaints about lack of shelter and the following year brought approval of a veranda around the whole of the 'triangle' and a series of covered walkways on the pier.

Later, more berths were again required as the Packet boats were frequently having to double-berth, so 1930 saw a scheme underway to extend the Red Pier and to link it to the Victoria Pier with a viaduct across Circus Beach. This had a covered shelter on its landward side.

The Circus Beach name came from the use of the Hippodrome by visiting circuses, but later became part of the Steam Packet goods yards and is now largely car parking.

When the pier and roadway were complete, the pier was opened on May 24, 1936 by Sir John Simons, the Home Secretary, and named the King Edward VIII Pier to delighted cheers from a great crowd of onlookers. But the king abdicated on December 11 that same year, leaving the pier with the claim to be the only public work to carry his name.

The work had meant that the pier lost its very decorative harbour light and was not only longer than the old Red Pier, but also approximately twice as wide.

To be continued...



Postcard views of busy terminal and pier, before and after the verandah was added



Over time, the 'triangle building' became more used by residents as well as ferry passengers (iMuseum)